

A WILLIAMSBURG PAPER

WILLIAMSBURG V
September 10-13, 1975
Vancouver, British Columbia

THE DYNAMIC OF SHAPING NATIONAL POLICY PRIORITIES

By

Soedjatmoko
Former Indonesian Ambassador to the United States

Towards a viable South East Asia ?

Problems and processes
An agenda for discussion

by

Soedjatmoko

The national and international implications of recent changes in Indo China have brought once again into focus the problem of external and domestic security for the non-communist countries of South East Asia, and especially its relationship to development.

Apart from the important politico-military lessons which can be drawn from that experience, including the relative significance of various forms of foreign military support, which will not be dealt with in this paper, the sudden collapse of South Vietnam especially, showing the intrinsic political brittleness of a consumption-oriented, foreign induced - and supported economic development pattern, may well contain for the future of the region, its most important lesson. It raises anew the question of the desirability - and feasibility - of a more autonomous type of development and its social and political requirements, capable of competing effectively with the communist systems; one which is not only capable of keeping within tolerable limits the social and economic disparities which inevitably seem to accompany the development process, further aggravating structural imbalances inherited from the colonial period, but is also capable of providing - not only at the end of the road, but at all points along its trajectory - sufficient social and political cohesiveness, national resilience and popular support. This involves not only the areas of economic and social priorities, and methods of mobilization and participation, but also of a shared vision of a desirable future, on a national as well as individual level, of national ideology, and of social and political organization. It also involves a reconsideration of a number of balances: between equity and growth, between center and periphery, between a from-the-top-down approach and a from-below approach, and between freedom and national discipline. It includes questions regarding the extent of the social and political basis of development, of the integration and identification between government and the governed, between the armed forces and

the population at large, as well as questions of national sense of purpose, national will, national pride, and on the personal level, of hope and the prospect of individual betterment.

In a broader sense it raises anew the question of relative allocation of limited national resources between development needs and those for domestic and external security. What kind of development strategy tends to aggravate security problems? At what point does a reduction in the growth rate, with a view to accommodating social and political needs, create political and security problems of its own? On the other hand, at what point does an increase in military expenditure for security purposes become selfdefeating because of the consequent reduction in development expenditure? Put in a different way, which overall development strategy, including its social and political elements, is capable of enhancing national security and national resilience at the same time? These questions have their counterpart at the level of external security. Theoretically speaking, a choice will eventually have to be made between three alternatives: reliance on outside protection, armed neutrality, or unarmed neutrality. What are the external conditions that make each of these options the most desirable and feasible? It is obvious that the responses to these questions not only depend on their own assessment and expectations with regard to the international situation, especially with regard to the possible behaviour of the countries of Indo China towards their neighbours. It will also depend in large measure on the perceptions of the major powers external to the region, and on their notions regarding an acceptable balance of power and influence among them within South East Asia. The degree of competition between China and the Soviet Union in South East Asia, for instance, will be very much influenced by America's conception of its role in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, and by the cue Japan will take from that role. Also longer term considerations involving scarcities and changing patterns of raw materials supply and access to strategic waterways enter the picture. Here the uncertainties will remain considerable for quite some time. It will take time before the external behaviour patterns of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos crystallize. Because of domestic reasons no one can expect the United States to develop a clear and credible strategic posture with regard to the Western Pacific and South East Asia within the next two years. In addition, expectations with regard to developments on the Korean peninsula are bound seriously to affect major power behaviour as well.

It may well be that early stabilisation of the South East Asia region will require some new forum that will make it

possible for both the major powers and the countries in South East Asia to clarify to each other their views, their fears, their expectations and intentions, and to state their perceptions of their own national interest, before some degree of mutual understanding can grow, on the basis of which, a set of viable balances can be reached among the major powers, between these powers and the countries of South East Asia, as well as among the South East Asian countries themselves. If no such common forum is found, it will be necessary to go through a prolonged and uncertain process of bilateral, more or less forceful probings, with their inevitable miscalculations, before such a consensus can be worked out. It is in the course of this period of probings and of exchanges of more or less explicit signals and explanations that it will become clear whether it is possible to think of regional cooperation in South East Asia to encompass the whole of the region, or whether we should think in terms of two competing regional groupings, with all its dangers of continued instability and external power involvement. Much will also depend on the extent to which the non-communist major powers, especially the United States and Japan, are willing to accept more autonomous, selfreliant development models for the non-communist countries of South East Asia, as well as the adjustments in some of their external economic relationships which these entail. The international debate on the new economic international order and the emotions that accompany it, is closely linked up with this problem.

The search for the optimum balance between security and development and the kind of development that is at all times supportive of security needs, therefore cannot be conducted by the non-communist countries in South East Asia in the light of domestic conditions and preferences alone. That balance is also a function of geopolitical factors as well as of the perceptions, intentions and behaviour of the world's major power centers. Also, the response to these problems will most likely be different for each of the non-communist countries in South East Asia, as a result of traditional rivalries, of differences in historical experience, geo-political situation, social, economic and political conditions, different levels of tolerance, and differences in the way the economies of these countries are plugged into the international trading system. In addition it is to be expected that the major power balance with regard to each of these countries will work out differently, giving shape to different major power configurations for each country. Hence, South East Asia may become an example of what might be called "multiple coexistence".

In this light, attention should be drawn to yet another process of adjustment, namely the search for a new consensus among the non-communist countries in South East Asia

for a common solution to their situational problem; a consensus also with regard to a shared vision of the future of the region, one which at the same time allows for considerable variations in response to both domestic and external pressures and needs, but is also strong enough to provide a basis for a range of common policies that will give additional weight to the voice of the South East Asia region within the concert of Asia-Pacific nations and in the international arena. Here a number of difficult intra-regional problems will have to be faced, both among the non-communist countries and within Indo China. There is also the question as to what extent the countries of South East Asia will be willing - apart from their development and security expenditures - to commit an adequate part of their limited resources to the building of the economic and institutional infrastructure for regional cooperation. What sacrifices are they willing to make towards those ends in terms of their own national interest, narrowly conceived? At this point it should also be noted that in the new setting of major power interaction, none of the South East Asian nations can afford to ignore developments on the Indian subcontinent and in the Indian Ocean. Likewise relationships with the non-aligned nations and the rest of the third world will be of great importance. Domestically, some of these countries may find existing structures and policies adequate to accommodate the necessary adjustments. For others, more fundamental changes, in a major departure from earlier policies and orientations, will become inevitable. These questions are already creating - and will create even more - intellectual and political ferment, both within and outside the power-structures in the countries of the region.

What is essentially at stake is whether, after serving for centuries as a cockpit for external power rivalries, South East Asia will finally come into its own, as a relatively stable and cohesive region, free from undue external dependency from both the non-communist West and communist East, with a distinctive voice and identity of its own, but consisting of states with a wide variety of social systems, or as a Balkanized area, continuously buffeted and manipulated by external powers. In part this will depend on whether the non-communist nations of South East Asia will be able to work out their own societal alternatives to both the communist and the South Vietnam development models, and whether they can develop closer and more effective cooperation among themselves, especially with ASEAN. As to the major powers especially, it will be of the greatest importance for them to realize that we are not dealing with a situation which offers a new option. The key to that option lies within the South East Asia region itself, within the vision and political will of the countries involved. Still the key can only be turned if in their search for major power balance, the major powers will find it within themselves to exercise restraint and patience, and to draw into their calculations towards

such a balance, the possible impact of their policies on the region of South East Asia. Here the future of detente, the intensity of the North-South problem and the state of the international economic system, will inevitably affect judgements and perceptions. But above all, the question will be whether the external major powers will be willing, and will consider it in their own interest, to allow both the communist and non-communist South East Asian countries to work out their own destinies within an international setting of low major power involvement and competition, and will be willing to adjust their postures and policies accordingly. It is within this context that our deliberations at Williamsburg V assume their special significance.

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