

## **FROM SEAFET AND ASA: PRECURSORS OF ASEAN**

*Nicholas Tarling*  
University of Auckland

With the disappearance of the imperial structures that had dominated Southeast Asia, newly-independent states had to develop foreign policies of their own. So far few, if any, have been willing to allow historians to explore the documentary evidence that has no doubt been preserved. Somewhat paradoxically, they must turn to the archives of external powers, which largely follow a thirty-year rule. Their diplomats were indeed often keenly interested in collecting information from ministers, on the golf course or otherwise, and from officials, who might convey or leak it more or less straightforwardly. In my recent book, *Regionalism in Southeast Asia*, I was able to incorporate material from United Kingdom (UK) records on the development of Southeast Asia Friendship and Economic Treaty (SEAFET), Association of Southeast Asia States (ASA) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). I have been turning more recently to the material in the New Zealand archives, which contain not only reports from New Zealand diplomats but also from Australian and Canadian diplomats as well. They have both supported and modified my conclusions.

In the book I made the obvious but not always stated point that the new states were, though equal in sovereignty, unequal in power. That feature, of course, they shared with the rest of the world of states. Their geography and their history suggested, however, that it would be only too easy to redress such imbalances by recourse to larger powers outside the region. Nor was that likely to be readily accepted by the largest state in the region, Indonesia, which was bound to claim to be rather more than equal. In the longer term the states were able to handle the issue by at once asserting their independence, sovereignty and integrity, and at the same time forming a regional association on that very basis. The goal was only reached by a rather indirect route, and observers, and perhaps participants, were often pessimistic, mistaken or even dismissive.

It is striking that Malaya played so large a role in the many initiatives that marked the early phase, but perhaps not surprising. It had become independent—just 50 years ago—and now had to ensure its security. Perhaps my book exaggerates the extent to which it formulated its policy in the light of its relationship with Indonesia. The papers I have since read do not make much of the point. But it still seems clear that, of all the relationships it had now to develop, that one was crucial, even if it was not

always best to say so. Indonesia was not only wrapped around Malaysia. It had armed itself to deal with domestic revolts and was challenging the former colonial power for West Irian (Papua).

No longer in the hands of a minor European state, the Indies were in the hands of a Republic, the most populous state in the region, proud of its record in winning independence and conscious of a leadership role, expressed, for example, in its role in the Afro-Asian movement. Malaya did not want merely to rely on its defence agreement with the UK. Nor did it want a merely bilateral engagement with Indonesia, which would imply another kind of dependence. Its regional initiatives sought an answer to the conundrum.

Early in February 1958, Tunku Abdul Rahman visited Colombo, and there urged closer co-operation between the smaller Southeast Asian countries. He took up the theme on 8 February at a press conference in Kuala Lumpur (KL) on his return. Southeast Asian countries were "too much inclined to dance to the tune of bigger nations. They should not concern themselves unduly with the world and Afro-Asian politics when they had problems of their own nearer at hand. An effort should be made to build up their own unity and understanding. If they did not do this, they would have to look outside the area for protection and the full meaning of independence would be lost." Tunku Abdul Rahman again referred to the topic in a talk with the British High Commissioner, Sir Geofroy Tory, on 12 February. Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand all had similar problems, in particular "the need to deal with Communist subversion", and should exchange ideas.<sup>1</sup>

Early in 1959, Tunku Abdul Rahman visited the Philippines. "A new South-East Asian mental approach was required", he declared at Baguio, and recalled a proposal he had made at Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) for a economic charter.<sup>2</sup> At the end of his visit he and President Garcia issued a communique that referred to friendship, racial kinship and determination to meet the challenge of communism. The leaders agreed on the need to raise the standard of living and invited other countries to subscribe to the idea. Their representatives would meet to discuss ways and means. Closer economic cooperation between Malaya and the Philippines was needed. It was also necessary to forge cultural ties and closer collaboration among the countries of the region to solve common problems. Regional leaders should meet more frequently. Foreign investors should be given assurances.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cradock/Newsam, 21.2.58. DO 35/9913 [1], NA, Kew.

<sup>2</sup> Cluuton/Lloyd, 22.1.59. DO 35/9913 [12].

<sup>3</sup> Communique, n.d. DO 35/9913 [11].

Tunku Abdul Rahman, it was reported in Jakarta, had "a Southeast Asia Cultural and economic alliance" in mind. "As part of the arrangement or perhaps in lieu of it, there would be a drawing together of the Filipino, Indonesian and Malay peoples around a nucleus provided by the Federation." The Canadian embassy in Indonesia thought he was flying a kite, but found that the Malayan ambassador (Senu) had been instructed "to attempt to persuade the Indonesians of the desirability of some such arrangement ... their participation was essential because ... the possible growth of Communism in Indonesia and the threat to Malaya there from, was one of the principal considerations behind the whole idea." The Jakarta press had been critical, and the Canadians thought the proposal had little chance of acceptance. "Indonesia is almost certainly unready to sacrifice what she considers to be her position of influence among the larger group of Bandung powers for any formal alliance, Pan-Malayan, Southeast Asian or otherwise. ... Indeed the Indonesians may well resent the suggestion that they accept leadership from Malaya, a nation they regard as their junior in age, experience and influence."<sup>4</sup>

The Canadian High Commission in KL explored the idea of "a South-East Asia Club" with Zaiton Ibrahim bin Ahmad, then principal assistant secretary at the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). He put the emphasis on economic cooperation and cultural exchange. The initial core would be Malaya, the Philippines and Indonesia, "in a good position to help each other because of their affinities of race and language". Indonesia might join, even though the underlying aim was to "strengthen the powers" to resist Communism, since its leaders were really anti-Communist. Thailand, Zaiton thought, might be "the most logical first addition".<sup>5</sup>

Subandrio, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, made it clear that his government preferred bilateral agreements.<sup>6</sup> The Canadians explored the reasons for the negative reaction with Anwar Sani, deputy director of Asian and Pacific affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). "Malaya and more especially the Philippines were, he said, too much under foreign influence to sponsor such a pact. ... It would be desirable in Indonesia's view for the sponsors to recover their 'national identities' before striking out too far internationally."<sup>7</sup>

Asked by the Canadian High Commissioner (Heasman), the New Zealand Department of External Affairs found it difficult to comment on the Tunku's proposals: they changed in form on almost every occasion he put

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<sup>4</sup> Canadian Embassy Jakarta/Ottawa, 15.1.59, 33. PM 434/10/1 Pt 2, NA, Wellington (hereinafter Pt 2).

<sup>5</sup> Reece/Ottawa, 15.1.59, 28. Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> AG Commissioner for New Zealand in South East Asia in Singapore/Wellington, 23.1.59. Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Newton/Ottawa, 23.1.59, 42. Ibid.

them forward. "This continuing imprecision suggests that the Malayan initiative is in large measure a reflection of a vague, but perceptible desire in some of the smaller countries of the South East Asian area—a desire for a form of cooperative association which they can feel is their own." They were "groping towards a purely South East Asian grouping, which would at once enhance the sense of unity of the area and keep them out of the quarrels of the major powers. At the same time, none of them would be prepared to give up the present substantial Western economic aid they now receive." The Malayan proposals faced the basic difficulty of "giving a sufficiently independent basis to the new grouping to attract Indonesia and others while still retaining the economic and political support and assistance of the West". Long-term the development Tunku Abdul Rahman envisaged could be in the Western interest. "It could encourage a sense of interdependence among South East Asian countries, with a consequent increase in their solidity against the Communist threat to the area as a whole. By introducing a regional basis of common interest among Asian countries, it might also do something to reduce the absorption of the Afro/Asian group with the racial antipathies which at present dominate and unify its activities."

It was difficult, the department concluded, to see any basis for economic cooperation among the countries. "To all of them trade with other countries is much more important than an expanded intra-regional trade would be; they are largely competitors in the world market as producers of raw materials; and they must all rely, in varying degree, on capital investment from countries outside the area."<sup>8</sup>

In Singapore the Acting Commissioner for New Zealand, R. A. Lochore, found that British officials tended to think that Tunku Abdul Rahman was mainly influenced by the forthcoming elections. Lochore himself thought it was more than a matter of electoral opportunism. Tunku Abdul Rahman was "constantly aware that anything done for its own sake"—an investment charter, a federation of trade unions, a football federation—would "help to build up the autonomy of countries of South East Asia" and thus be "tacitly anti-Communist in effect". Probably, like other Southeast Asian leaders, he also saw the problem as "fundamentally one of containing Chinese influence in the area", whether it came from Peking or Taipeh. What Tunku Abdul Rahman now called SEAFET might find little to do in the near future, but New Zealand's attitude should be "exploratory and approbatory". Lochore did not at all agree with the views

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<sup>8</sup> Preliminary Reactions to Malayan Proposals for Closer Relations between South East Asian Countries, 18.2.59. *Ibid.*

of the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO). "The obvious beginning is with the three countries of Malay stock, and the organization should not be launched at all except with the active support (and preferably leadership) of Indonesia."<sup>9</sup>

Lochore was alluding to the views developed in London by an inter-departmental meeting [Foreign Office (FO), CRO, Board of Trade], which had commended the idea of closer association, "a solution to the political problems of the area which in general we favour", but questioned the Tunku's tactics. The Philippines, to which he went first, was, given its close US links, "the least suitable of the states of the region to play a leading part in promoting the principle of association". The departments thought Tunku Abdul Rahman should turn his attention northward. "Ideally we would like to see Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam included." Burma was "a particularly strong candidate", non-Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and neutralist, "but internally anti-Communist". Thailand was essential if the association were to have "any geographical cohesion", but a prominent member of SEATO, it should not play too dominant a role at first. "The inclusion of Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam could be welcomed on all counts. Provided a balance is struck by the inclusion of some of the mainland states, there would be no objection to the participation of Indonesia in a Malaya-based association, which might even in the long run exert a moderating influence over her."<sup>10</sup>

The New Zealand High Commission in KL thought that Tunku Abdul Rahman might have been "thinking on his feet" in Manila, "and attempting to forestall any attempt to persuade the Malayan Government to join SEATO". Zaiton said the ministry was drawing up draft proposals which might be sent to the Philippines government and followed by a second conference. The membership should be confined to Southeast Asia, "a recognizable geographic entity". Indonesia had not yet been given an outline of the proposals, but Zaiton acknowledged that it was "the next and most logical member of the grouping envisaged by the Tunku". Officials in KL, the High Commission concluded, were "by no means certain that anything positive will emerge. Their present tendency is to play the thing quietly, determine their own views, find out to what extent these views accord with those of the Philippines and then, and only then, consider approaching the wider group of South East Asian countries."<sup>11</sup>

"The Tunku's plan is now passing through a period of consolidation and elaboration", Arthur Menzies of the Canadian High Commission

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<sup>9</sup> Memorandum, 24.3.59. Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Curwen/Williams, 13.3.59. DO 35/9913 [34].

<sup>11</sup> First Secretary/Wellington, 17.3.59. Pt 2.

reported. The founding members of SEAFET were to be Malaya and the Philippines. They would like to bring Indonesia in, but the chances of doing so did not on balance seem "robust". The Philippines' membership of SEATO must prejudice SEAFET in Indonesian eyes. "Our Embassy in Jakarta has reported that Indonesians fear that SEAFET membership would reduce their influence in other parts of the Afro-Asian world and would commit Indonesia to anti-Communism to an unwelcome degree." The fact that their "junior" Malaya put it forward also prejudiced SEAFET in Indonesians' eyes. Indonesia, on the other hand, was seeking to establish closer bilateral ties with Malaya, trying to sell a more comprehensive treaty than the Federation wanted to accept. "The apparent contradiction within the Malayan and Indonesian attitudes presumably lies in a Malayan belief in the safety of numbers and Indonesian dislike of SEATO." Beyond the "inner circle", Thailand was the most likely candidate for membership. SEAFET could be quickly forgotten after the elections. But there seemed to be behind it "a genuine urge for increased cooperation and mutual knowledge among Southeast Asian nations who have been largely screened off from each other by western influence and control. This impulse is allied to a genuine wish for collaboration to help the small nations of this area to stand more firmly on their own feet and to be less economically and culturally dependent on the West."<sup>12</sup>

Now New Zealand High Commissioner in Ottawa, Foss Shanahan offered observations on the Malayan proposals based on his experience in Southeast Asia. Tunku Abdul Rahman had, for example, mentioned the idea to him during a break in the meetings of the working party on the UK-Malaya Defence Agreement. "He did not then spell out the reasons which prompted him to suggest such an idea, but I think they are to be found, to some extent, in the conditions which exist in Malaya and South East Asia generally." In Malaya Indian opinion tended to be neutralist, and the Chinese were bound to be influenced by Peking. While he had "a strong feeling of affinity" with the UK and welcomed the Defence Agreement, "he is anxious to create another area of balance or strength within the region of South East Asia itself". He told Shanahan that all the countries of Southeast Asia were small and "would be noticed and effective only if they found some way of getting together". The "Colombo Powers" was not an adequate regional grouping, and the Afro-Asian group was too concerned with North and Central Africa.

Economic cooperation had been "sporadic" and the post-colonial countries had "not yet developed the habit or attitude of mind which would

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<sup>12</sup> Menzies/Ottawa, 18.3.59, 172. Ibid.

suggest that they give a special priority to the question of their relations with their immediate neighbours". The Philippines was, however, anxious to demonstrate its independence of the US, and it seemed that Malaya would go ahead with a treaty, though a two-power treaty would be "rather unfortunate because it would probably make it more difficult to widen its scope to include countries such as Burma, Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia".

Though it should not, at least at that stage, be directly involved, New Zealand should encourage a wider grouping. The partners, as in most other treaties, would have "a variety of motives". In the Tunku's mind one of the values of a treaty and the cooperation it should promote was "greater political understanding which may lead to some affirmation of a general position on the question of the regional security of its members". The Indonesians might be reluctant to join, given reasons of prestige, "and the feeling that they have a role to play not just regionally but essentially on the world's stage". But New Zealand should do what it could to encourage them to take a favourable attitude towards joining, because it might "assist the process of creating stability in Indonesia and bring her into closer relations with the Countries of South East Asia".<sup>13</sup>

Felixberto Serrano, the Philippines Foreign Minister, visited KL on his way to attend the SEATO conference in Wellington. On SEAFET he was "hopeful but vague". It would at first be bilateral, then Malaya and the Philippines would consider bringing others in.<sup>14</sup> Serrano brought home Malaya's ambitious draft. He told the British ambassador, J. H. Lambert, that Malaya and the Philippines had in mind as members of the pact Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and possibly Laos. Serrano said "that there was at present a regional wave of nationalism in South East Asia and both he and the President thought that Philippine policy should not be to sit back but to take the lead so that this nationalism could be directed in the right direction".<sup>15</sup>

Razak and Ismail, the Malayan leaders, found the Thai leaders enthusiastic when they visited Bangkok in June, Zaiton said, and they had undertaken to put some comments in writing.<sup>16</sup> Foreign Minister Thanat subsequently visited other mainland capitals. Only two of the communiqués—those in Rangoon and Saigon—mentioned regional cooperation, the New Zealand charge in Bangkok (Charles Craw) noticed. Thanat said it would be

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<sup>13</sup> Observations, Malayan Proposals for Closer Economic and Cultural Cooperation in South East Asia. Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Hunt/Smith, 8.5.59. DO 35/9913 [53].

<sup>15</sup> Lambert/Moss, 30.4.59. DO 35/9913 [51A].

<sup>16</sup> Peren/Wellington, 13.9.59. Pt 2.

"fatal to force the pace.... Cooperation had to come naturally in response to the genuine feelings of the countries concerned and if the proposals were quietly discussed he thought that progress would eventually be made. When asked whether in view of Indonesia's attitude he thought the scheme should be confined to the peninsular countries plus the Philippines, Thanat said that he believed that eventually Indonesia also might be interested."<sup>17</sup>

By November the tactics had changed. Ismail said that Tunku Abdul Rahman had written to the Prime Ministers in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, the Philippines and Indonesia.<sup>18</sup> There was a danger, a diplomat at the British High Commission commented, that the agreement might look too restrictive. That was probably why the Federation had dropped the original idea of a bilateral agreement with the Philippines, to which others could accede in favour of a simultaneous approach. Ghazali bin Shafie, then Deputy Permanent Secretary at MEA, "was also hopeful—I think unduly so—that Indonesia might veer round."<sup>19</sup>

The following month, Prince Sihanouk made it clear that Cambodia could not join, lest it forsook neutrality. Thailand and the Philippines were both in SEATO and only one part of Vietnam had been invited.<sup>20</sup> By March 1960 it was clear that the SEAFET proposal was in the words of J. C. Crombie at the CRO, "doing very poorly". Indonesia had reportedly formally rejected the idea. Burma's reply was "disappointing" and Laos had not replied at all. The Philippines and Thailand were "apparently in favour" though the Thais stressed the need for more preparatory work. Visiting KL in February (15–19 February 1960), President Ngo Dinh Diem had said the same. The joint communique at the end of his visit referred to economic collaboration and cultural exchange and to stabilising the price of raw materials, but not to the Tunku's scheme.<sup>21</sup>

"The Burmese favour closer contacts between Southeast Asian countries but feel that the time is not yet ripe for a multilateral treaty", the Canadians understood. "They are also concerned, no doubt, to conclude their border settlement with Communist China without raising any issues which might antagonize their big Communist neighbour." The Soviet ambassador in Rangoon told Arthur Menzies that his government approved Burma's attitude. "Even if SEAFET started out with economic and cultural co-operation goals it would inevitably become an extension of SEATO."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Craw/Wellington, 7.8.59. Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Telegram, 18.11.59, 182S. DO 35/9913 [65].

<sup>19</sup> Cradock/Ormerod, 28.12.59. Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Garner/Lloyd, 1.2.60, 6. FO 371/152140 [D 1022/3], NA, Kew.

<sup>21</sup> Crombie/Smith, 3.3.60. DO 35/9913 [83].

<sup>22</sup> Menzies/Ottawa, 7.4.60, B-31. Pt 2.



Early in April, however, Mohamed Sophe bin Sheikh Ibrahim, in charge of the project in KL, visited the Philippines to discuss the proposal with Serrano. Only a limited statement was released, rather negative in character: more countries should be invited to join; the union should not be a bloc or alliance; it should not be identified with any political ideology, nor political in character, nor linked with any defence agreement; and "it should be in keeping with the spirit of non-interference in the internal affairs of member countries, characterised by the Bandung Conference". Osman, the Malayan representative in Manila, said concrete proposals had been worked out, which Mohamed Sophe was taking to Bangkok. Neither South nor North Vietnam was to be invited to the Working Group that would be set up and it would up to the group to decide the question of participation. That course was taken because Indonesia objected to inviting only the South. Secrecy was occasioned, Osman said, by the fact that Malaya and the Philippines "were anxious not to appear to want to take all the limelight for sponsoring this scheme. They were afraid that the unforthcoming reaction from the neutralist countries ... was the result of their disinclination to follow the lead of two obviously Western-inclined countries". They planned to make the scheme "appear to burgeon simultaneously from a common desire for co-operation".<sup>23</sup>

In the event Tunku Abdul Rahman decided to go ahead with SEAFET on the basis of membership by Malaya, the Philippines, and Thailand alone. Reminded of the danger, he said that a start had to be made somewhere: an organisation in being might be more attractive than a mere plan.<sup>24</sup> The new association, he announced in July, would be called ASAS, Association of South East Asian States, not SEAFET. It might be more practicable, he said, to have multilateral agreements on particular projects than a treaty, and officials from Malaya, the Philippines and Thailand would draw up a list. ASAS would explore the possibilities of regional cooperation in aviation, shipping, marketing and pricing primary products, technical and administrative training and research. Though the three countries would form the working group, "the idea was to get as many interested countries in the region as possible into the proposed association". He hoped the working papers would help to dispel doubts and "remove misgivings other countries of the region felt about joining the association".<sup>25</sup>

The decision to abandon a formal treaty seemed in Wellington to be "realistic and practical". If SEAFET had been carried through, it would have been an association of nations with close links with the West. "If regional

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<sup>23</sup> Chancery/SEAD, 13.4.60. FO 371/152140 [D 1022/8].

<sup>24</sup> Telegram, 28.4.60, 258. DO 35/9913 [94].

<sup>25</sup> Telegram ex KL, 5.8.60, 165S. FO 371/152141 [D 1022/30].

co-operation is to be expanded on a broad and meaningful basis, it is important that uncommitted countries like Indonesia and Burma agree to participate. There seems a better prospect of this being achieved under the new more informal working relationship."<sup>26</sup> The Economic Division (B. M. Brown) was more cautious. "The whole trend towards regionalism is one of which New Zealand has cause to be wary, in Asia as well as Europe". Wherever possible, it should "stress that the interests of outside countries should not be neglected".<sup>27</sup>

Garcia visited KL on 8–11 February, and Thanat followed on the 11th, for talks on ASAS with Tunku Abdul Rahman and Serrano. In a communique issued on the 13th, the parties announced that they would set up an organisation, starting with a working party.<sup>28</sup> The New Zealand High Commission had the impression that the Filipinos had been seeking to establish "a political and economic association, with something of an ideological basis". The Tunku, "conscious ... that any organization which conveyed a too obvious anti-Communist character would be anathema to countries such as Indonesia and Burma, stressed economic aspects." Both Serrano and the Tunku expressed regret at Indonesia's "aloofness".<sup>29</sup>

In April, in the course of an interview with members of a Malayan Study Tour group in Jakarta, Subandrio described ASAS as "without substance" and "useless". For the time being, there was no need for the formation of such an organization, "especially as the backgrounds of these states differ from each other. There must be bilateral relations first." The *Malay Mail* attacked his remarks editorially. The most popular explanation for Indonesia's attitude, it said, was that having pioneered the formation of the Afro-Asian bloc, it did not wish to join a more restricted group. "Moreover, it was believed that Indonesia felt herself to be the 'big Brother' of the South-East Asian nations and considered that any alliance involving them should have her at its head. Instead, in the case of ASAS, Indonesia would be expected to join after others had achieved the credit of sponsoring the organization." If true, that was petty, it said, the New Zealand report adding that it was an interpretation that also had "considerable private support among Malayan officials".

The first meeting of the Thai, Malayan and Philippine Working Groups was scheduled for Bangkok in mid of June 1961. It was opened by Thanat, who spoke in "eloquent but general terms" of the "edifice of neighbourly cooperation": it was "directed against no one", but designed to

<sup>26</sup> Minute by HLH, 12.9.60. Pt 2.

<sup>27</sup> Note attached to *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Telegrams, 14.2.61, 120, 121. FO 371/159704 [D 1022/8].

<sup>29</sup> B. M. Brown for HC/Wellington, 24.2.61. Pt. 2.

enhance the welfare of the respective nations through cooperation in the economic and cultural fields. The communique, issued on 22 June 1961, reiterated that the cooperation would be "non-political in character, independent in every way of any power bloc and essentially one of joint endeavour in the economic and cultural fields". The conference had covered a wide range of possible forms of cooperation, discussed the organization of the Association and prepared a draft agenda for a meeting of foreign ministers. No details had been revealed and the British embassy remained doubtful that Thailand would "match the enthusiasm of the other two countries".<sup>30</sup>

The New Zealand High Commission in KL discussed the meeting with one of the Malayan delegates. Welcoming the delegation, the Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand made a speech with some unfortunate political overtones, "saying something to the effect that since SEATO was no longer prepared to do anything about Laos, it might well be a suitable field for the attention of the proposed new organization". Much concerned that this "raised the ghost of the original Philippines conception of the agreement as an Asian anti-Communist front", the Malaysians sought clarification. The Deputy Prime Minister was mistaken, mis-reported, Sarit said. The meeting focused on economic matters, where the Malaysians were more modest and better prepared than the Filipinos.<sup>31</sup>

The New Zealand embassy in Bangkok could secure no comments from the Thai officials, but made some comments of its own. "The Thais could hardly afford to turn their backs on ASAS and therefore have played along with it." The government thought it could make "quite effective use of any trend towards Southeast Asian 'togetherness' by emphasizing that if its Western allies (having let down Laos) are not as concerned as they should be about Thailand then the Thais must redouble their efforts to look after themselves and at the same time seek friends among their neighbours". Indeed Thanat had made the point on 19 July when speaking to the American Association. Laos, he said, was a springboard for aggrandisement, but, without oil, uranium or investments, it offered no incentive for the West to defend it. Thailand had to re-examine its position and cultivate its neighbours. Obviously he did not expect that ASAS could do much to save his country from the Communists. "Indeed he did not mention ASAS at all, no doubt deliberately, in order to leave the impression that Thailand might go a great deal further and eventually adopt neutralism of the Burmese and

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<sup>30</sup> Chancery/SEAD, 23.6.61. FO 371/159704 [D 1022/22].

<sup>31</sup> Brown for HC/Wellington, 30.6.61. Pt 2. The Thai disappointment over SEATO related to the Western decision to deal with the Laos crisis through a conference at Geneva. See, for example, Peter Busch, *All the Way with LBJ?*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 21–2.

Cambodian type." Charge Craw did not think that expressions of disappointment at the Western attitude on Laos could be dismissed as blackmail. Thanat was "quite sincere in his efforts to arouse his own people and Thailand's neighbours to the dangers which face them....He would undoubtedly like to see a widespread Southeast Asian grouping, but if this is not possible just now then he seems to feel that for the moment ASAS is better than nothing. I am sure that he is far more interested in its political possibilities than in its cultural and economic activities."

Pote Sarasin, the SEATO secretary-general, had been advocating the establishment of a regular series of prime ministers' meetings on the lines of the Commonwealth system. Sarit said he was too busy and his English too poor. Sarasin and others thought ASAS could not have a wide appeal because two of its members belonged to SEATO. "If only, it is said, the Philippines had not rushed in with public announcements whenever possible, it might have been feasible to coax Burma into coming in, and with this achieved, Cambodia might have been tempted to join because if the idea of Summit Talks had been promoted Sihanouk might well have agreed to participate."<sup>32</sup>

At the end of July the three foreign ministers met in Bangkok, and their declaration, issued on 31 July, established the ASA. Its machinery was to include an annual meeting of foreign ministers, preceded by a meeting of the joint working party; a standing committee, chaired by the foreign minister of the host country, and including the diplomatic representatives in its capital; ad hoc and permanent specialist committees; and a national secretariat in each country.<sup>33</sup>

For Thanat, Roger Peren reported from Bangkok, ASA was "entirely separate from SEATO—untarnished, as it were—by non-Asian influence—but a useful talking point when the future of SEATO is being discussed and possibly even an 'alternative in being'."<sup>34</sup> That its concern over Laos played a part in shaping the Thai approach is also suggested by the remarks made, "after calling for a beaker of Napoleon brandy", by Anand Panyarachun, Thanat's private secretary, in a conversation at Geneva with Fred Warner of the British Foreign Office. Thailand "could not go on for ever being dependent on outside influences". Its future lay in "a loose federation of South East Asian states pursuing a neutral but strong and independent policy". It was therefore trying to get the Association of Southeast Asian States going. "This would have to come very slowly. The Burmese and the

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<sup>32</sup> Craw/Wellington, 20.7.61. Pt 2.

<sup>33</sup> Arnfinn Jorgensen-Dahl, *Regional Organization in South-East Asia* (New York: St Martin's, 1982), pp. 21-2.

<sup>34</sup> Peren for Charge/Wellington, 11.8.61. Pt 2.

Indonesians thoroughly distrusted it and thought it merely a manifestation of American policy. But nothing could be further from the truth; to Thailand it represented a gradual severing of ties with America."<sup>35</sup>

The initial proponents of the Association were ironically enough soon to fall out, and its survival came into question. Tunku Abdul Rahman had also been pursuing what may at least in part be seen as another means of assuring the security of the newly-independent Federation, its expansion to include the Borneo states, two of which were colonies of Britain and one under British protection, and also, more reluctantly so far as he was concerned, the self-governing city state of Singapore. The Philippines election of November 1961 brought to power a president, Diosdado Macapagal, who took an interest in the claim to Sabah that Filipinos based on the claims of the sultanate of Sulu. The claim had been raised in early years but not pressed. But if North Borneo became part of Malaysia, it would be even more difficult to take up. What Tunku Abdul Rahman, in a conversation with the New Zealand High Commissioner, Charles Bennett, called this "foolish and frivolous" claim,<sup>36</sup> bedevilled the early years of ASA and it has never been formally laid to rest.

The notion of a Greater Malaysia was by no means new, but it seems likely that Tunku Abdul Rahman took it up in 1960–61 in the context of the increasingly aggressive steps the Indonesians were taking to secure Dutch New Guinea. If, however, he hoped to foreclose their interest in securing the Borneo states, they were bound to see his action as provocative, and once they had secured West New Guinea they began what became the confrontation of Malaysia. It was only with the destruction of the Sukarno regime that that policy was abandoned. ASEAN, as Ghazali put it, was "a development out of the pains of *'konfrontasi'*." But it adopted the approach and methods of ASA.

Created for some purposes, agreements and institutions may take on others. ASEAN of course developed a life of its own. Avowedly economic and cultural in purpose, it was also political. SEAFET and ASA give some hints of its aims and some indications of its methods: the need to restrict the intervention of major outside powers (a need which grew rather than diminished if it became impossible to balance them); and the need to avoid the dominance by one substantial regional power, but to allow it due influence. The basis was the mutual acceptance of the status quo among states, equal in sovereignty but not in power. Indonesia's acceptance of the

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<sup>35</sup> Warner/MacDermot, 23.8.61. FO 371/159947 [DF 2231/392].

<sup>36</sup> Bennett/Wellington, 9.11.62. PM 43410/1 Pt 3.

approach made for its success. Whether it is a recipe for success in a wider region remains to be seen.

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