

# Southeast Asians' Attitudes Toward Their Regional International Problems of Today and Tomorrow

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Now that peace seems to be very much in the offing in Southeast Asia, it is highly desirable to have a somewhat closer look at the opinions of the natives of Southeast Asia toward their regional and international concerns.

A small-scale random sampling of the opinions and attitudes of the educated citizenry of Southeast Asian countries by means of a questionnaire indicated that the leadership of tomorrow in that important part of the globe is split over questions of war and peace, East-West international relations, capitalism, communism, and socialism, the reality of China, the role of the United Nations as a peace keeping body, and the U.S. involvement or disinvolvement in Vietnam. This writer undertook a four week tour of Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Burma

and polled public opinion by means of a questionnaire and personal interviews. The opinions discussed below are based on tabulated results of 225 questionnaires, here and there interspersed with comments stemming from personal *tete-a-tetes* with over one hundred person.

In doing this the author, himself an Asian from Pakistan, had to face a variety of difficulties. For example, quite a few of the faculty at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok refused to fill out the questionnaire because it had not come to them from the Government of Thailand or from the Dean's Office. They feared to express their opinions in writing even though the questionnaire could be answered anonymously as a large percentage of those who answered it did. The students at the same campus, however, were much more independent

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and cooperative. The French language being the *lingua franca* of the educated people in Cambodia, fewer Khmers were able to answer the questionnaire which was written in English. Burma, on the other hand, does not admit visitors as freely as other countries in the region do. Tourists are not allowed to visit the country. A lone exception, however, is made in the case of international passengers who are granted twenty-four hour transit visas. In their case as well the regulations are highly discouraging and prohibitive. The application for such a visa must be accompanied by three passport size pictures, a fee of two dollars, valid visa for the next country of visit, two letters of recommendation-- one each from the employer and a bank, respectively certifying stable employment and a "healthy" bank account of the applicant, and, finally, a prepaid flight ticket with confirmed reservations for onward travel in twenty-four hours. Of this time two to three hours are taken by cumbersome and delaying health, immigration, custom, and currency checks made by the Burmese authorities at the time of landing and departure from Rangoon airport. Use of land routes to enter Burma is expressly forbidden. In the case of

Burma, therefore the very short stay of the author made it almost impossible to gather valid information. The firm grip of the ruling military *junta* upon the land made my task even more difficult; the people of Rangoon were afraid to express their opinions verbally, let alone do so on paper. Nevertheless, whatever views this writer was able to gather were rather important and reflective of that country's social, economic and political situation.

In answer to the first question, "the long-range national interests of your country would be most served through an alliance with: China———, Russia———, United States———, Great Britain———, France———, Others———, Comments, if any———," the United States came out as the most favoured country. The breakdown reads as following:

|                     |     |
|---------------------|-----|
| United States.....  | 139 |
| Japan .....         | 89  |
| China .....         | 75  |
| Great Britain ..... | 55  |
| Russia .....        | 49  |
| France .....        | 42  |

Ninety-one respondents also stressed friendship toward all countries of the world. The highest vote for the United States came from Thailand, Singapore, Malaya, and Laos. In the case of Laos, however, it is es-

sential to note that the majority of the people polled were students at Lao-America Centre. The Centre is run by USAID and is mostly staffed by American teachers. As it is clear from the above breakdown, most of the respondents gave more than one choice.

To the question "how essential do you consider the U.S. economic assistance to the welfare of your country? Extremely essential—, Essential—, Needed—, Would help—, Unessential—, Comments, if any—," only twenty thought that it was unessential. A sizable number argued between extremely essential (19) to would help (77). Essential and needed polled thirty-eight and sixty-four respectively. Seven respondents did not answer this question.

This widespread desire to receive economic assistance from the United States was frequently punctuated with remarks like: "Important that economic assistance be given with no strings attached," "No direct aid in loans or gifts but sympathetic tariff policy and educational help," "But only if it (economic aid) comes without . . . any encroachment upon national honour," "Such help is harmful to human dignity . . . until a sense of equality (? ) prevails," (contrast this with

"beggars cannot be choosers" remark of another Asian) to "Trade not aid," "We need investment, not assistance," and the "U.S. economic assistance," decried a Siagonese in transit in Vientiane to the United States for graduate education, "must go through a bilateral well-studied plan aimed at developing the industrial as well as agricultural potential of the recipient country rather than decide the nature of the aid herself as she (the U.S.) does now."

A majority of the people surveyed confidently rejected the idea that Communist ideology alone offered sure solutions to their knotty economic, educational, technical know-how, and population problems. "Which of the following do you think would most suit the future needs of your country? Communism—, Capitalism—, Socialism—, Comments, if any," only seven opted for Communism, fifty-four for Capitalism, nineteen for Islamic Socialism (Malaysia), and a large majority of 122 regarded some kind of national socialism to be the only cure of their current problems. It must, however, be understood that the large vote for socialism was not entirely unqualified; quite a few in this group set forth preconditions on the adop-

tion of a socialist philosophy and suggested public interference only when and where private initiative failed, such as: education, health, communications, works of public utility, and certain kinds of industry. They further added that the "restricted socialism" suggested above was not to be accepted as a permanent remedy and that it must make room as time and conditions permitted for a fuller and freer enterprise.

These attitudes, however, radically changed when it came to the problem of war and peace, U.S. Asian policies, and the maintenance of U.S. bases in Asian and Far Eastern countries. Their answers to these questions reflected a certain degree of concern and, at times, disillusionment, resentment, and anger at U.S. international policies in Asia since 1945, in general, and 1954, in particular. Only fifty-eight of the 225 wholeheartedly approved of the U.S. policies in Asia, seven offered conditional approbation, one hundred and thirty-one expressed disapproval, and the rest (29) abstained from expressing any opinions. One general complaint was that "U.S. was still far from comprehending the peoples and the problems of Asia."

Likewise, the question "Do you

think that the war in Vietnam is civil in nature and one which should be fought or negotiated by the Vietnamese people themselves? Yes —, No —, Comments, if any," was answered in the same vein. One hundred and forty-one voted yes, sixty-three no, with twenty-one abstentions.

The crucial question "Who do you think to be an aggressor in Vietnam? North Vietnam —, South Vietnam —, China —, Russia —, United States —, France, Others —, Comments, if any —," seventy-five thought that North Vietnam was the "real culprit," a much larger number (106) regarded the U.S. as an aggressor country, only nine picked at China, three at Russia, and the rest seemed to be divided beyond comprehension. In utter confusion they nagged at every country listed above. Several regarded more than two countries responsible for the tragic situation in Indo-China.

Bitter and hostile comments however, were reserved for the next inquiry which solicited their opinion about the possible "reasons for United States' involvement in Vietnam: Communist containment —, Honour treaty commitment —, Moral obligation —, Assist South Vietnamese —, Imperialism —, Others —, Comments, if any."

one hundred thirty-seven believed that American desire to contain Communism had led to U.S. entanglement in Southeast Asia, twenty-four would not admit of any other reason than imperialism, twenty-seven thought that both Communist containment as well as imperialism were the motivating forces behind U.S. involvement in Vietnam, only thirty-four would go along with the Pentagon contention that the American presence in Southeast Asia was born of treaty commitment and her desire to assist the people of South Vietnam in their effort to resist outside aggression. A little more than one per cent (3) did not answer this question.

The aforementioned question evoked highly interesting comments, such as: "The U.S. has economic interests in continuing the war," "American pride," "Power politics with China," "The United States considers China as her major enemy and wants to encircle her with her military bases. (As already stated the questionnaire was polled before Kissinger's visit to Peking.) The war in Vietnam enables the U.S. to do so." "Self-imposed policeman of the world. It is for the Vietnamese people to decide what is right or wrong (for them) and not for the U.S. to tell a nation what is in their

interest. About thirty million Vietnamese are not fools." "Communist containment and the 'Chicago gangsteristic' nature of the Americans." And, finally, "Communistphobia and the preservation of (a) dignity which has already been shattered." There were a few and only few good comments as well, such as: "Sincere American commitment to help preserve democracy in Southeast Asia," "Americans are a brave and generous people."

When asked, "Do you think that the United States should continue its commitment to South and Southeast Asian countries in situations similar to the one that exists in Vietnam? Yes——, No——, Comments, if any," fifty-one, strangely enough, answered in the affirmative, one hundred forty-two in the negative, and thirty-two offered no opinions. Quite a few of the second group, however, were inclined to accept military aid from the U.S. but were against any kind of direct involvement in the cold war. Several pointed out, "You see, direct involvement creates Vietnams," and an English woman lecturer of sixteen years residence in Singapore observed: "I do not think any other country in Southeast Asia would like to be another Vietnam."

Naturally, a vast majority of Southeast Asians considered the

presence of American military bases on their soils prejudicial to their national interests on several counts. It was feared that the existence of bases would inevitably lead to their involvement in the cold war of the big powers, 2) provide the opposition parties as well as anti-state elements with an easy handle to discredit the government, 3) lead to increased American interference in the civil and military administration of the recipient country, 4) was against national dignity and sovereignty, 5) would lead to loss of confidence in the state among the people and thereby lower national morale, and, finally, would tend to provide a sense of artificial security and arrest national development in the most sensitive fields.

The people of Southeast Asia seem to be markedly divided over the extent to which Communism in the neighbourhood poses a threat to their society and institutions. The reaction to my survey revealed that out of every seven respondents four believed that Communism did constitute a serious threat; the remaining three, however, did not consider it a problem of much concern. The ones who felt convinced of the threatening posture of Communism agreed at their multiple exposure to the advancing tide of

Communist ideology and felt especially concerned about the future of democratic institutions in their countries. The consensus was that weak and errant socio-political institutions (especially the latter) in Southeast Asian countries offered a fertile ground for Communist encroachment, Communism, they added, would become a sure threat if the political leaders of their countries showed lack of wisdom, energy, and tact in dealing with the socio-economic problems besetting their societies.

Nevertheless, the pro-China lobby had a slight upper edge over the Sinophobes. More people thought that the development of Red China would either be beneficial or indifferent to the future of their country than harmful (128 to 88, with nine abstentions). The pro-Peking group attributed China's "unpredictable and belligerent" mood to her sense of past wrongs and present insecurity against the United States and Soviet Russia. As China has continuously (until then) been denied her rightful place in the comity of nations, as she has been refused recognition by the U.S. and her allies, she felt the necessity of, it was argued, forcing recognition and acceptance upon others, more particularly upon her geographical

neighbours. A graduate student at the University of Kuala Lumpur tersely remarked: "When a great power like the United States is so rigid and obstinate in her international relations, how could China be expected to act normally, especially in view of her 19th and 20th century experiences at the hands of the West, Russia, and Japan.

There was a general agreement that once China was seated at the United Nations, she would find: a) a highly sophisticated platform to ventilate her pent up feelings against the West, b) become more "responsive to world opinion," c) "hesitate to use the instrument of force and subversion in other societies for fear of criticism at the international forum," and, above all, times be available for a dialogue.

More disturbing than anything else was the lack of confidence shared by most Southeast Asians in the organization of the United Nations. Even those who were conscious of its achievements and realized the necessity of its continued existence were quite critical of its past performance. Only one per cent thought that the U.N. was extremely effective," less than eight per cent regarded it as a "quite effective" organization, 11 per cent "ef-

fective," thirty-three per cent "ineffective," forty per cent "useless," and the remaining seven per cent preferred not to offer any comments.

Again, of the 225 persons polled 38 per cent thought that the world body was "totally dominated by the Big Powers and their selfish national interests," 48 per cent viewed it to be "partially dominated" with only 12.5 per cent agreeing that it was "serving all countries equally." One and a half per cent chose not to answer. It was generally agreed that the United Nations was subservient to the Big Power interests. Many were critical of its present structure, especially the five permanent seats on the Security Council and the veto right enjoyed by the permanent members. In order to be effective and acceptable the U.N. must, they insisted, rid itself of these anomalies, develop universal membership, and be invested with increased powers to deal with crisis situations irrespective of the countries involved. The venerable world organization was pronounced culpable over Kashmir, the Middle East, seating of China in the U.N. (admitted in the Fall of 1971), Rhodesia, and Portuguese Africa.

The above analysis of opinions and attitudes held by Southeast

Asians makes it abundantly clear that the post World War II Southeast Asia is going through a tremendous change; things are not as they were and are not going to be as they are today. Three things left a profound impression upon the mind of this writer as he travelled through different parts of the region under study:

Firstly, the past history of Southeast Asian countries has become their most sensitive chord. They view everything coming from outside with an eye of suspicion and distrust. The peoples of these countries prize their recently won freedom after centuries of subjugation to foreign masters. Consequently, at times they suspect even the hand extended to them in sincerity and friendship.

Secondly, the goals of tomorrow and the day after are not clearly delineated in the minds of the present leaders of Southeast Asian countries -- not even the next generation of leaders, let alone the ways and means to achieve them. The problems of these countries are staggering and the solutions none too easy to find.

Thirdly, the peoples of Southeast Asia belong to a different race or races, are surrounded by their own geographical environments, have dif-

ferent climates, practise different religions, cherish different customs, traditions, and values, have different eating habits, wear different dresses, speak different languages, possess a different history, enjoy different sources of inspiration, and, therefore, have completely different temperaments and personalities.

Under these circumstances, one thing becomes very clear; the American, Russian, Chinese, or European solutions to their problems may neither be fully applicable to their problems nor in consonance with their personalities. Also, outside formulas and prescriptions, especially in political affairs, carry their own stigma and tend to play in the hands of one or the other selfishly inclined political function. It is my opinion that in order to be successful solutions to their problems must come from within. It would, therefore, be best for the major powers to leave these countries alone, let them work their own way out, and let the "have nations" (these include the major powers as well) attempt to solve their economic, industrial, and technical, know-how problems from a distance in a selfless manner, or, better still do so through the agency of the United Nations.

Despite the Vietnam war and several other questionable Asian



policies, the United States still enjoys, comparatively speaking, a reasonably popular image with the peoples of Southeast Asia; American dollar is the most popular and acceptable currency; so are the American tourists. The people everywhere are aware of the great necessity of receiving economic assistance from Washington. In spite of the apparently good, munificent, and philanthropic intentions in rendering economic assistance, the United States invariably receives a tarnished image whenever Washington tries to solicit the recipient countries into the arena of her cold war with the Communist Bloc. While this furnishes a reason for complaint to the friendly elements, it at once provides a *casus belli* to the hostile forces, plays against the United States, and defeats the very purpose of the aid. Too much of wooing does at times breed suspicion and even repulsion. The United States would do much better should she try to render economic and technical aid for the sake of aid, for humanitarian reasons, with no strings whatsoever attached, and left it to the recipient country to feel grateful.

Over a hundred billion dollars drained through the muzzle in Vietnam have brought neither peace nor victory, nor have they been able to

contain Communism. If anything, Communism seems to be a bigger "threat" to Southeast Asia today than it perhaps was 1954, when President Eisenhower wrote a letter to Ngo Dinh Diem. Imagine a South and Southeast Asia if the same amount were spent on peaceful purposes and on the economic development of the countries in the region; there may well have been no Vietnam war, and the lands in question may have been rendered barren for Communist doctrines to spread.

However, it is not meant to suggest that the United States should quit Vietnam suddenly and quickly. Unfortunately, it is not possible any longer. Intervention in Vietnam was a major error and a miscalculation in the U.S. foreign policy; unconditional withdrawal at this time would perhaps be an error of still greater magnitude, would unleash a reign of bloodbath in the whole of Southeast Asia, and greatly weaken the forces of political and military organization, Communist as well as non-Communist.

At the same time the brutal conflict cannot be allowed to go on indefinitely. Military victory for the combatants is out of question. Both sides know this fact though

*(Continued on page 28)*

**Southeast Asians' . . . . .***(Continued from page 48)*

they refuse to admit the reality. Presently, the conflict has become a war of attrition--attrition of each other's patience and not of weaponry, the latter being easily replaceable. The only alternative left with Washington is to de-escalate the war to a minimal point and keep up pressure on both Vietnams to negotiate in a new spirit--spirit of ending their hostilities for meaningful

negotiations. At the same time the "clique" in Saigon must be told in unmistakable terms that the war would be theirs to fight if they failed to show greater realism, tolerance, and accomodation in dealing with the Vietcong. The Vietcong are a reality; in fact, they have been so since the start of the present phase of the Vietnam conflict. Such an approach backed by a firm attitude and patience alone seems to offer hopes of a durable peace in war-torn Indo-China.