

## Southeast Asia by Sophie Tanapura

### With friends like Maggie Thatcher. . .

*. . . President Reagan needs all the help he can get to salvage U.S. influence in Asia.*

**B**ritish Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher embarked on a whirlwind, 11-day tour of the "Asian Commonwealth plus" during the second week of April, including the countries of Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Sri Lanka, and India. Indonesia was the plus, the only non-Commonwealth country on her list.

The Thatcher tour was designed to accelerate the rout of U.S. strategic presence, which began with Kissinger's China Card and continues in the perceived absence of clear U.S. policy toward the Philippines, the collapse of the ANZUS alliance in the South Pacific, and the latest spate of suicidal "Jap-bashing" by the U.S. Congress.

Mrs. Thatcher's aim was to bring her host countries into line with the imperial aspirations of the rising strategic gamemasters in Asia, the Soviet Union and China. True to the Churchillian tradition, the shrewd "Iron Lady" intended to carve out a piece of Asian real estate for Britain, using, as her starting point, the remnants of the last British Empire.

The giveaway to the deal was the constant refrain in Mrs. Thatcher's discussions of her favorable, personal, first impressions of the "new leadership" of Mikhail Gorbachov in Moscow, and London's successful negotiations with Peking over the future of Hong Kong.

Mrs. Thatcher's immediate objectives were to drum up support for a regional defense pact of the Singapore-Malaysia area, and to drum up

business for Britain's ailing industry under the guise of giving Commonwealth cooperation a shot in the arm. The main cash item on the table was arms sales.

In Malaysia, Mrs. Thatcher discussed with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad a five-nation defense pact, under which Britain, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, and Australia would defend the Singapore-Malaysia region, formerly British Malaya. The idea is rather arcane, and decidedly reminiscent of British colonial interests during the Second World War, when the British Crown's primary concern was safeguarding Singapore, located at the strategic chokepoint of the Malacca Straits.

The British idea of a defense pact has always been rather odd. During the Second World War, the British were quite irate, to put it mildly, that Thailand refused to trust the "reliability" of British forces in Malaya. Thailand refused to act as a military shield for British possessions, and, instead, allowed Japan to march through and seize Singapore.

The British never forgave Thailand for that! Perhaps, for that reason, Thatcher excluded Thailand from her trip.

Mrs. Thatcher chose the wrong audience for her Commonwealth sales pitch. At the state dinner given in her honor, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir cut short the Iron Lady's laughable "Commonwealth sentimentality." Mahathir said bluntly that "almost 25 years of independence have

taught Malaysians . . . that the world really cares very little for sentiment."

Unfazed, Mrs. Thatcher moved on to Sri Lanka and India. On the subcontinent, the lead agenda item was the seeming blind eye authorities have shown toward British-based support networks of Tamil terrorists in Sri Lanka, and its hands-off approach to the Sikh separatists associated with Jagjit Singh Chauhan, who publicly claimed responsibility for the murder of Mrs. Indira Gandhi.

With many promises, and no prospects for actual change in British policy toward the exile Sikh and Tamil communities, the Iron Lady returned to London. In her wake were a series of real or promised arms deals, including confirmation of a £100 million sale of Rapier anti-aircraft missiles to Indonesia, and indications that the freeze on an outstanding £1 billion arms deal with India will be lifted, the first phase of which will include sales of Harrier jets and Westland helicopters.

The apparent success of Thatcher's tour dimmed only slightly when India found out that neighboring Sri Lanka had asked her to deploy British troops to the troubled island country. Mrs. Thatcher wisely refused.

Indonesia was the economic "plum" on Mrs. Thatcher's itinerary. The most populous country of the ASEAN alliance, oil-rich Indonesia was seen by Maggie as a new "sheep" she hoped to enfold in the Commonwealth with offers of British expertise in agriculture and technology, especially storage and distribution of Indonesia's rice crop.

What most delighted Maggie was the "good use" Jakarta has made of City of London financial services. Once hooked by the City's merchant bankers, Mrs. Thatcher was confident the "sheep" could be led more easily to the slaughter.