

Asean strives to keep independence

by Lydia Cherry

The foreign ministers of the six countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) expressed support for the East Asia Economic Grouping at their meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia the last week in July. Though details still have to be worked out and it is not expected to be formalized until at least January, it was clear by the end of the deliberations that the EAEG plan initially proposed by Malaysia has now become the initiative of the six member states—Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Brunei.

A second economic proposal introduced by Thailand also drew unanimous consent. This plan calls for the creation of a “free trade group” among these countries, which would involve comprehensive, cooperative tariff removal. The goal of this “common market” approach is to stimulate intra-regional trade flow. The shift is no small task, in that Asean countries now compete with each other for the same export markets, as well as competing for capital investment and technology from the same sources.

Nevertheless, as a Thai official explained in an interview with the London *Financial Times*, the six have a head start because there is already growing cooperation in vital areas. The official said that by promoting joint-venture industrial production, Asean plans to pool its capital, land, and labor so that goods will be able to flow into each other’s markets freely. He pointed to the idea of “growth triangles,” which are an extension of the idea of pooling resources and sharing markets. The first of such triangles now covers the southern Malaysian peninsula, Singapore, and the Indonesian island of Batam.

Asean spokesmen said the two plans would be complementary, with the EAEG—which would also involve Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—envisioned as the “talking group.” U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, in Kuala Lumpur for the larger post-ministerial conference that followed the Asean meet, conveyed the U.S. position on the EAEG to Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in a “frank, low-key” manner, a senior U.S. official said, noting that the U.S. remains opposed to it. A Japanese spokesman at the meetings said Japan was interested in the idea but was waiting for it to be formally voted up by Asean.

The focus on economic collaboration was a notable departure from Asean’s 24-year life as a political bloc. Also a departure was that the six issued a joint communiqué urging a solution of the debt crisis for the developing world, and

that a coordinated tripartite approach should be undertaken to speed up debt relief for debtor countries. It made clear that even the relatively economically successful Asean nations are beginning to feel the depression. Four Asean countries—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand—“have huge foreign debts,” Malaysian news service Bernama noted.

Soviets and Chinese attend

The meeting also was unusual because it was the first in which both the Soviet Union and China were present as observers. This had been sought by both Moscow and Beijing. According to the *International Herald Tribune*, both the U.S. and Japan expressed private reservations about the presence of Yuri Maslyukov, deputy prime minister of the U.S.S.R., and Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen. The U.S. and Japanese concern is that Asean may make the Soviets and Chinese full partners in Asean, to increase its leverage with the West. Before the meeting was over, Asean officials invited the U.S.S.R. to attend the next Asean ministers meeting in Manila in 1992. A similar invitation is expected to be extended to China.

During the followup meeting between Asean and its dialogue partners—the U.S., Japan, the European Community, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea—there was extensive discussion about a possible need for a security alliance. In a meeting in Manila last March, U.S. and Philippine officials attempted to put into place a security doctrine termed “cooperative vigilance.” The argument is that Asean should be turned into a military bloc to police the region. But Asean officials turned it down flat.

The U.S. tried to get Asean’s backing to take action against Burma for “human rights violations,” but was not successful. During the first day of the post-ministerial meetings on July 23, the U.S. officially imposed economic sanctions against Burma. Undersecretary of State Robert Zoellick, speaking in Kuala Lumpur, attacked Burma for “poisoning the region with narcotics,” and attempted to force Asean to follow suit. Asean officials responded that they would instead engage in a policy of “constructive engagement” with Burma’s military leaders.

Japanese Foreign Minister Nakayama reiterated in his speech that “the most important issue for the stability of countries in this region is economic development,” and that Japan would continue to “do the best it can” to expand cooperation toward this goal. Nakayama suggested that Asean and its major trading partners consider using the annual conference “as a process of political discussions designed to improve the sense of security among us.” He added that “it might also be advisable” to organize a meeting of senior officials in order to make these discussions effective.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi told newsmen July 23 that, although Japan’s idea on security collaboration would be looked into further, “Asean disagrees with it.”