

## ASEAN BIO-DIPLOMACY A RIVER IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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It is a great privilege to be able to share my thoughts on "Rivers as a Model for Bio-Diplomacy." Bio-diplomacy is a relatively new concept to me and I am by no means an expert on the subject. Nevertheless I am a professional diplomat and all forms and aspects of diplomacy interest me. Moreover, I am a Southeast Asian, and there are rivers in my boyhood memories. This is therefore a subject that is close to my heart and I sincerely hope I shall be able to do justice to it.

The lives of the peoples of Southeast Asia, especially those in the rural areas who constitute the vast majority, are intimately bound to nature. Forests and wild animals serve as omens, mythological figures, farm help, food, sources of medication and attire, means of transportation, providers of recreation and competitors for terrain and food. Nature includes the monsoon winds that drive the rains that water the rice crops and drove the frail vessels of our ancestors across entire oceans, in order to trade or migrate, as well as the stars that guided them in those perilous journeys, the two oceans that Southeast Asia straddles - the Indian and the Pacific - and the rivers that abound all over the region. These are the factors that shaped the cultures of the peoples of Southeast Asia and, although Southeast Asian cultures vary greatly from country to country and from one ethnic group to another, there are features that are spread virtually region-wide. Thus, houses built on tall sturdy posts are a common sight all over Southeast Asia. Under such houses, domestic animals are conveniently sheltered at night but that is not the main reason why they are built that way. It has more to do with the frequent flooding that takes place when rivers overflow their banks, for a great many of the human settlements that have thrived in the region, since prehistoric times, were built on river banks or on deltas. There are, of course, Southeast Asian ethnic groups that have always lived in highlands and valleys at some distance from either sea or river, but to a very large extent, the Southeast Asian peoples are both marine and riverine.

Of the many rivers in Southeast Asia, one of the most important historically and economically is the Mekong River. It is, in fact, the twelfth longest river in the world. Its source is said to be in the snowy mountain range of Tangku-la in Eastern Tibet, from where it follows a south-westward direction, for about 4,180 kilometres, crosses Chinese territory, then follows the border between Thailand and Cambodia, passes by the Laotian capital of Vientiane and the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, and, finally, empties into the South China Sea by way of a complex delta near the southern tip of Vietnam, right next door to Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon. The drainage basin covers an area of approximately 795,000 square kilometres. Because of the huge volume of silt that the Mekong regularly delivers into the delta, the area is navigable only by shallow draft vessels. However, the upstream parts of the river are navigable during the rainy season.

Most of the peoples of Southeast Asia originally came from the area around the source of the Mekong River. The Malay ancestors of present-day Malaysians, Indonesians, Bruneians and Filipinos, considering their orientation to the sea, may have come from somewhere in the East of the source of the Mekong. More than a thousand years ago, under pressure from the Han people, they moved southward in great numbers and eventually took control of insular Southeast Asia, the Malay Peninsula and what is now Southern Vietnam.

At the same time, many other ethnic groups from the same area - around the source of the Mekong - were making a southward migration, probably utilising the Mekong as a highway to their future homes. These included the Burmans, the Karens, the Mons, the Shans, the Kachins, the Thais, the Khmers, the Nam Viets. On the Southeast Asian mainland, they would establish a number of great kingdoms, some of which, like the Malay Kingdom of Champa and the Mon-Khmer Kingdom of Funan, would eventually be lost in the mist of history, while others would survive through the centuries to become the States that today comprise mainland Southeast Asia. Through the centuries, the Mekong River flowed on, providing fish and irrigating rice fields while remaining an impassive witness to the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires. In the 1840s, the Mekong River witnessed the first incursions of a western power, the French. Two decades later, in 1862, the French extracted from the Emperor of Vietnam the right to navigate and explore the Mekong, intending to make use of it as a southern gateway to the vast China trade, where the British already had a head start. With much of the Mekong River under French control, it was only a matter of time before Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos would be colonised and become known as French Indochina.

For many more decades, the Mekong flowed on, a silent witness no longer to the internecine warfare for supremacy among rival indigenous kingdoms, but to the vagaries and harshness of colonial rule. Then, following the Second World War, it saw the successful struggle of the peoples of Indochina for independence and freedom from colonial rule. Meanwhile, it was delivering so much silt to the delta that it was virtually changing the contours of the shoreline of the southern tip of Vietnam.

In view of the importance of the Mekong Basin, the United Nations has, since 1957, sponsored a Mekong River Development Project to develop the river system. However, the protracted conflict in Vietnam and Cambodia and the general political instability of mainland Southeast Asia, since the 1950s until recently, have been too formidable an obstacle.

As late as 1974, there was a Committee for the Co-ordination of the Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin, that had been set up by the Governments of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam. The Committee was overseeing the activities necessary for the building of dams, irrigation systems and other infrastructures for the utilisation of the water resources of the Mekong. These were to be funded through a

massive influx of foreign aid. Based in Bangkok, this Committee had a plan to establish a chain of national parks for all of the Mekong river south of China. These national parks would serve to protect the forests that would maintain water supply to the Mekong.

It was an excellent and comprehensive plan that might well have been implemented at that time; unfortunately, the following year, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam fell into communist hands and it would take another decade before the plan could be regarded as having any chance of being implemented. Today, the United Nations is back at work on the Mekong. At the same time, the Asian Development Bank has been committed to fund more than one hundred infrastructure projects along the Mekong River.

However, if the future of the Mekong River countries seems exceptionally bright today, it is largely because of a factor that has served as the principal promoter of economic co-operation in Southeast Asia, as well as the main bulwark for peace, security and stability in the region. This is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and, most probably, in the future it will no longer be possible to discuss the many positive developments on the Mekong river, without specific reference to the ASEAN Programme of Economic Development Co-operation. Allow me, therefore, to share with you a few important facts about ASEAN.

Doing for Southeast Asia essentially what the European Union is doing for Europe, ASEAN, which is observing its thirtieth anniversary in August this year, is considered one of the most successful regional organisations in the world. But thirty years ago, when it was founded by the Foreign Ministers of Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, its critics had a field-day making dark predictions that ASEAN would not last, let alone prosper.

For at that time, the founding members of ASEAN had a lot of fences to mend: Indonesia and Malaysia had just gone through a period of armed confrontation; the Philippines and Malaysia were engaged in a bitter territorial dispute; and Singapore was still smarting from its separation from Malaysia. Moreover, a major clash of arms of the Cold War was already being fought in Indochina. The odds were stacked against the fulfilment of the ASEAN vision of a community of ten Southeast Asian countries co-operating in peace and harmony, in pursuit of social and economic development.

But over the years, the ASEAN countries patiently developed the habit of working together and painstakingly learned to trust one another. It took them almost a decade before they would adopt major policy initiatives such as the Declaration of ASEAN Concord, which started a programme of economic co-operation, and the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC), which gave initial substance to the ASEAN concept of a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in Southeast Asia. It would take another ten years and the entry of a sixth member, Brunei Darussalam, before ASEAN could take really bold economic initiatives at the Manila Summit of 1987, that eventually led to a decision in Singapore in 1992 to establish an ASEAN Free Trade area in fifteen years, later reduced to ten.

At the historic Bangkok Summit of 1995, all ten Heads of Government of Southeast Asia signed the Treaty on a Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (SEANWFZ). By then, Vietnam had been admitted to ASEAN membership and it had become a distinct probability that before the end of the century, all ten Southeast Asian countries would be within the ASEAN fold. It was during this Summit that ASEAN declared to launch a new pattern of regional economic development co-operation involving other Asian countries. The following year, the relevant ASEAN Ministers met in Kuala Lumpur to discuss the first such co-operative undertaking. Very appropriately, the first such undertaking is development co-operation in the Mekong basin.

On such co-operation, the thoughts of His Royal Highness Norodom Ranaridih, First Prime Minister of Cambodia, are worth quoting: "We are living in a borderless world where international trade and economic co-operation are very essential. However, this should not prevent regional or sub-regional co-operation between partners sharing common national endowments and resources. Challenges and circumstances in the Mekong Six, comprising South China (Yunnan Province), Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, represent more than 50% of the future ASEAN Ten. This is not a random grouping of nations defined as a region, rather, ours is a gathering driven by the fact that some part of each of our economy is tied directly to a shared resource, a shared opportunity - the Mekong River. The economic hexagon will be one of the fastest growing in the region and in the world. So while we try to function independently as nations, we also need to work together for everyone's benefit. In this context, Cambodia can alleviate itself by bringing into the picture the Mekong Six, and the economic benefits of this grouping. In short, the Mekong Six can together play an important role in the continued growth of ASEAN. This will bring about various synergies between ASEAN and the Mekong Six and provide a win-win formula. This arrangement could then be used as a prelude for an ASEAN - Mekong Six collaboration."

Expected to provide assistance to this undertaking are multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Also committed to participate in the ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Co-operation are the Governments of China, South Korea and Japan. ASEAN officials are now deliberating on the mechanism by which the necessary funds will be delivered to the co-operation projects and activities.

On 17 June, 1996, Malaysia hosted the first Ministerial Meeting on ASEAN-Mekong Basin Development Co-operation. The meeting adopted a basic framework which spelled out the objectives and the principles which will govern the conduct of the Co-operation. The objectives are as follows:

- enhance economically sound and sustainable development of the Mekong Basin
- encourage a process of dialogue and common project identification, which can result in firm economic partnership for mutual benefit
- strengthen interconnections and economic linkages between the ASEAN member countries and the Mekong riparian States

The ASEAN Ministers agreed that the Co-operation would have to be supportive and complementary to the national development plans of Mekong riparian countries, and provide direct benefits to people in the Basin, in the form of employment, income generation, social uplifting and improved standards of living. An important guideline is that the Co-operation would have to utilise resources fully, and ensure stable and sustainable development leading to improved management of national resources and to environmental protection.

The Co-operation will not supplant any initiatives being pursued by the United Nations Mekong Basin Commission and other multilateral

agencies or donor countries, but will complement them. In the implementation of projects and activities, the participation of the private sector will be mobilised. All interested countries are, of course, welcome to participate.

A priority for the Co-operation is the development of infrastructure capacities in the areas of transport, telecommunications, irrigation and energy. Another priority is the development of trade investment-generating activities. There will also be programmes and projects to enhance agricultural production for domestic consumption and for export. Special emphasis is also given to sustainable development of forest resources and the management of mineral resources without any impairment to the environment.

Another factor that must be thoroughly considered is the tension that change creates in people. It is in this regard that the Co-operation will have to tread carefully during the planning and implementation of projects. The changes occasioned by massive construction works can have a profound impact, not only on the environment, but on the way of life of the people in the vicinity. For example, construction of the proposed US\$ 4 billion Sombor dam on the Cambodian stretch of the Mekong river is already encountering problems, as some 60,000 villagers in the 800 square kilometre affected area refuse to leave their homes, which will be flooded by the dam waters. It is essential for a fair, just and truly practical solution to this problem to be reached. The dam is badly needed by a cash-strapped Cambodia, which will be selling the power generated by the dam to neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam, that are in great need of electricity.

There will certainly be programmes and projects to boost industrial development, with emphasis not on heavy industry but on small and medium industries. The Mekong Basin is ideal for tourism; there will have to be projects to promote tourism. None of these, however, would be possible without a body of human resources capable of implementing them. There will have to be an appropriate emphasis on human resources development and on the development of science and technology.

The social and political impact of such undertakings can never be overestimated. For example, the completion of the physical infrastructures will entail a commitment to a freer movement of goods, services and people, as well as ideas. There is now a «Friendship Bridge» spanning the Mekong River and connecting the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the only landlocked Southeast Asian country, with the rest of the region. It has been pointed out that the fullest potential of that bridge will never be realised unless there is a greater freedom for people, goods and ideas to cross that bridge.

The appropriate ASEAN officials, in co-operation with the ASEAN Secretariat, are now taking an inventory of all development projects on the Mekong Basin, with a view to identifying precisely where the ASEAN-Mekong Co-operation will come in, without duplicating any existing effort. An interim report on the progress of the Co-operation will probably be submitted to the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur, in August 1997. A major progress report will definitely be submitted to the Joint Meeting of the ASEAN Foreign and Economic Ministers, which will be held just before the Second Informal Summit in Kuala Lumpur, in December. But even before that, ASEAN leaders are already envisioning railway links between Singapore and Kunming, China, with Malaysia currently undertaking the feasibility study. This is a vast and formidable task just launched by ASEAN. It requires a great deal of effort, patience, commitment and the expenditure of enormous sums of capital. But all ASEAN countries, including the insular members that will not directly benefit from the co-operation - Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam and the Philippines - are fully committed to ensuring the success of this undertaking which, formidable as it may be, is not half as challenging as the initial difficulties that ASEAN had to overcome when it was just a fledgling organisation that sceptics predicted would go the way of the dinosaurs.

We are determined to push through with the development of the Mekong river system because we want the less developed Southeast Asian countries to catch up with the rest of the region. For there cannot be two Southeast Asias, one rich and the other poor. Our entire neighbourhood must become one economically dynamic unit or the full economic potential of the region will never be realised. But we are determined to realise it fully before the year 2020.

The aforementioned issues must have stricken a familiar chord among those involved in the development of the Danube but, to be realistic, on the whole, they have to be viewed as being two different situations; one European and the other Southeast Asian. For one thing, the Danube countries have not been through the kind of political turmoil that the Southeast Asian countries went through during the height of the Cold War. Nevertheless, ASEAN countries will gain a great deal of useful insight by keeping an observant eye on the developments in the Danube, just as it may also be useful for the Danube countries to follow the progress of the ASEAN - Mekong Basin Development Co-operation.

We wish you success in your undertakings regarding the Danube and hope you wish us the same with our Mekong initiatives. Even better, the entrepreneurs among you could come over and participate in one of the most important initiatives being pursued in Southeast Asia today.

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