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Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

On 31 July 1961 the foreign ministers of Malaya, Thailand and the Philippines signed the Bangkok Declaration that established "...an association for economic and cultural cooperation among the countries of Southeast Asia to be known as ASA - Association of Southeast Asia." Last month in Kuala Lumpur ASA's first fruits were born: The Philippines agreed to send sixty medical doctors to Malaya to assist in the Federation's health program; Thailand began the ASA Fund with a grant of M\$ 1 million; Malaya established the first ASA express train between Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok and then made its M\$ 1 million contribution to the ASA Fund.

These were only the first manifestations of the mutual aid and cooperation that are the goals of ASA. In a joint communique of the ASA Foreign Ministers' meeting in Kuala Lumpur, agreement was also reported on the immediate implementation of the following projects.

- a. Conclusion of multilateral agreements on trade and navigation among the ASA countries.
- b. Abolition of visa requirements for officials and waiver of visa fees for ASA nationals.
- c. Joint action in the promotion of tourism.
- d. Early consideration of the establishment of special reduced rates for press and telegrams among the ASA countries.
- e. Immediate inauguration of an inter-capital through railway service between Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok, the ASA Express. (The first ASA Express rolled on April 22nd.)
- f. Extension of the newly established microwave telecommunications between Malaya and Thailand.

Target dates were set for these projects. General agreement was also reached on the exchange of experts, technical assistants, research fellows and scholarship students; the mutual accreditation of university degrees of ASA countries; and the formation of a special organization for Asian Economic Cooperation. Discussion is also underway on the formation of an ASA Airways.

Behind these happy if modest manifestations of international cooperation lie three years of patient and often discouraging work in which Malaya's Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tunjku Abdul Rahman, proved to be the one unswerving champion of the association.

ASA was first suggested in January 1959 in a joint communication by Tunjku Abdul Rahman and the then Foreign Minister of the Philippines, Felixberto M. Serrano. Not long after this, however, Mr. Serrano expressed the opinion that it was somewhat presumptuous for only three countries to form an association of Southeast Asia; he wanted at least a fourth. The Thais joined the discussions soon after the January communication, but just last year before an important meeting in Kuala Lumpur the Thai foreign minister doubted that the time was ripe for ASA. In due course Serrano reversed himself, and the Thais came to the meeting with full support for ASA.

In the two years preceeding the Bangkok Declaration, the association has had a number of names. The first was ASAS, Association of Southeast Asian States. Then came SEAFET, Southeast Asian Friendship and Economic Treaty. This was followed closely by ECCA, the Economic and Cultural Cooperation Agreement. Both were discarded when it was decided that no formal treaty or agreement was to be signed. Finally came ASA, the Association of Southeast Asia. This is a particularly happy choice in that asa, from the Sanskrit, means hope in Malay, Thai, and Tagalog, the official indigenous languages of the ASA countries.

The reactions of other countries have been mixed, but not altogether unpredictable. The most important of the other countries in the region are Indonesia and Burma. No word has come from Burma, but from the beginning Indonesia has been less than enthusiastic about ASA. Soon after the original Malayan-Philippines communication, Indonesia expressed severe doubts about ASA. To the Indonesians ASA seemed unrealistic and useless. Her own policy of unilateral agreements (few though they were) with other countries of the region appeared more useful and practical than what the Indonesians described as pious declarations of agreement on the value of cooperation. In addition, Indonesia felt that ASA would easily degenerate into a simple anti-Communist club; and since Indonesia's socialistic aspirations and her collaboration with Communist China are quite different from the anti-Communist policies of the other ASA countries, she did not want to enter a forum that might amplify rather than diminish her differences with other countries in the region. In expressing these doubts and reservations, Indonesia's language has generally been denigrating of ASA. Serrano reacted by calling the Indonesians a proud lady, and the Tunjku followed with some sharp rejoinders. The Indonesians claim they have been misquoted, and now they express a willingness to reconsider ASA after they have settled their dispute with the Dutch over West Irian.

South Korea and Ceylon have both expressed a positive interest in ASA. South Korea unhesitatingly remarked that she would join ASA if asked. In his private capacity, Ceylon's Minister Plenipotentiary to Burma thought that his country would certainly be interested in joining ASA

if its scope were broadened. Reactions in Kuala Lumpur were that the scope of ASA could be broadened any time the member nations desired.

From Moscow came the expected suspicious reaction. To the Russians ASA appeared as a camouflage for the (as they saw it) discredited SEATO. To them the real goal of ASA was to involve the neutralists - Burma, Indonesia, and Ceylon - in the Western anti-Communist block. Communist China took the same line. This was strongly denied by Tungku Abdul Rahman, who wryly remarked that he was happy these great powers were at least interested in and paying attention to what goes on in this part of the world.

The reactions within Malaya have been anything but strong. The newspapers are solidly behind ASA (as they are with everything the government does), but the popular reaction seems to be one of apathy. ASA is one of those vague good things that does not directly involve the little men. The Islamic opposition party, PMIP, is not opposed to ASA, but wants Indonesia and Burma included, just as they want Indonesia and the Philippines included in Greater Malaysia. Only the Socialists appear disturbed by ASA. In this as in many things they display an unfortunate lack of originality, for they too see ASA as a camouflage for SEATO. Malaya is not a SEATO member and the Socialists fear that through ASA Malaya will be forced to toe the SEATO line taken by Thailand and the Philippines.

It is generally acknowledged that the immediate economic impact of ASA will not be great. Although the three countries have a combined population of about 80 million, they are all primarily producers of agricultural products. They have had very little trade with one another (generally less than 1% of the total trade of any of the countries) and the prospects are only slight for an early increase of any significance. Without Indonesia there seems little prospect of control by ASA of the international market for such things as natural rubber. Some impact can be made simply through the sharing of what resources are available, especially in the field of skilled manpower. In general, however, for the economic significance of ASA, the future lies ahead.

The political involvement of ASA is mixed. From the beginning all leaders have proclaimed emphatically and often that ASA is not directed against anyone; it is to be non-aligned and non-political. Nonetheless, none of the ASA countries can be called uncommitted. All are definitely anti-Communist; Malaya and the Philippines have fought bloody campaigns against Communist terrorism at home, and Thailand has constantly felt the subversive influence of her great neighbor to the north. In one reply to oral questions in Malaya's House of Parliament, Tungku Abdul Rahman remarked that ASA would be open to all but the Communist countries. This must be taken as a statement of ASA policy for in the future membership of other countries must be agreed upon by all ASA members. Further, all three countries are committed to the formation of "property-owning democracies." Thus economically and politically the ASA countries do share a basic anti-Communist orientation.

Still, the expressed desire for non-alignment must be taken seriously. I am convinced that it is genuine, but that it may well mean different things in different parts of the world. One of the most potent forces in ASA is the desire of these countries to do things by and for themselves; a desire for self-identity that involves a breaking away from the foreign domination they have known for years. Although the ASA countries are free, they appear constantly in need of proving this to themselves. In my estimation this is an integral part of the new Asia that is shaking off foreign domination and searching for the control over its own destiny.

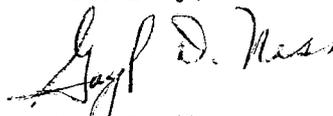
Here is just a sample of the basic sentiment shared by all three ASA countries. Tunku Abdul Rahman, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malaya: "We have said it all along and we say it again, that we have come together ourselves to do what we think must be done for the good of our countries and our peoples. It is our intention to show the world that the peoples of Asia can think and plan for themselves....We are out to help each other, to work together, to get things done in our own way without control or influence from outside."

Mr. Thanat Khoman, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, referring to the Russian suspicions: "They did not realize the surge in our hearts to be masters in our own house and our abiding faith in the Asian culture and traditions and particularly in our capability to shape and to direct for ourselves the future destiny of our nations.... Asian solidarity must be and will be forged by Asian hands...."

And the eloquent Vice President and Secretary of Foreign Affairs for the Philippines, Mr. Emmanuel Pelaez: "Mabuhay ang ASA -- long life to ASA. May it not only keep alive the hopes of the Malay in the kampong, the Thai by the riverside and the Filipino in the barrio -- but, beyond that, may it help to bring about the realization of these hopes in order that the millions of people in our countries may find a sense of true brotherhood not in suffering but in contentment, not in the degradation of poverty but in the dignity of an ample life, not in the darkness of ignorance but in the sunlight of education, not in the affliction of disease, but in the virility of good health -- not in the despair of a stunted life but in the exhilarating and exultant environment of limitless opportunity for the development, enrichment and fulfillment of the human personality."

May it, indeed!

Sincerely,



Gayl D. Ness

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