

A.K.M. Abdus Sabur

QUEST FOR A VIABLE REGIONAL ORDER IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Introduction

From the very onset of decolonisation, South-East Asia region has been beset with interrelated domestic and international conflicts owing their origin to a wide number of sources such as issues of state identity, acceptability of internal political rule, division within the nationalist movement on appropriate development model, separatism, irredentism, historical antagonism, determination of state boundaries and the like. In fact throughout post-colonial South-East Asia there has never been a time when the internal exercise of political power has been universally regarded as acceptable or legitimate or when external states with competing interests have not been attempting in one way or another to shape a regional balance deemed to have global significance. Such imputation of global significance has been determined by the extent to which major external powers have incorporated the region within their strategic perspective and the prospect and consequences of decisive internal political changes have been judged accordingly.

For about three decades after the end of World War II, conflict in South-East Asia turned mainly on the most appropriate model of economic development and on the corresponding social and political

order to be established in the states of the region. Internal parties attracting external support favoured competing models of economic and social change which entailed not only alternative types of socio-economic system but also alternative external affiliations. Such state of affairs in a bipolar world which emerged in the wake of World War II with two rival socio-economic and military blocs, one headed by the US and the other, by the USSR competing with each other for dominating role in the world attracted external involvement in South-East Asian conflicts, culmination of which was the US military intervention in Indochina. This war turned to be a protracted and costly military adventure lasting until its end in April 1975.

The end of Indochina war in 1975 initially gave rise to a measure of acceptability for the new political configuration within the region. External powers including the Super Powers also have shown a certain degree of restraint in their approach towards the region. As one analyst observed, the region has been removed by many governments "into cold storage".¹ All these generated hopes among a section of academicians and policy makers both in the region and outside that hitherto existed conflicts and disorder in South-East Asia would give way to a certain degree of stability in inter-state relations. But it did not come true. It was mainly due to the fact that neither the sources of conflicts in South-East Asia were liquidated nor the regional and external powers were prepared to refrain from taking advantage of them.

The new phase of conflicts in South-East Asia centered on the legitimacy of internal rule in and external affiliation of Kampuchea. Vietnamese attempt to revise the correlation of forces within Indochina through its intervention in Kampuchea ushered in a new political polarization in and around South-East Asia. For example China and Vietnam broke relations while Vietnam and the Soviet Union formed a virtual military alliance. Following its

1. See, Bruce Grant, "The Security of South-East Asia", *Adelphi Papers*, No. 142, 1978, p. 31.

occupation of Kampuchea, Vietnam was invaded by China. The US and China become *de facto* allies and with ASEAN and Japan they formed a new coalition of states in opposition to Vietnam's domination of Kampuchea with Soviet support. The central issue which divides Vietnam and her allies in Indochina from the ASEAN states also divides the external powers of global consequences, namely, the USSR on Vietnam's side and the US, China and Japan on ASEAN's side.

During the post-World War period, along with numerous conflicts of regional as well as global significance there have been a parallel quest for peace, stability and a viable regional order in South-East Asia as well. The historic Bandung Conference was also partly designed to serve this purpose. But the Cold War and one of its worst products—Vietnam War, made it almost impossible to initiate meaningful efforts directed at the settlement of South-east Asian conflicts and fostering regional stability. Again during the early 1970s, when prospects for a US withdrawal from Indochina became obvious, the regional countries could come out with a new initiative. This time, Malaysia came out with a concrete proposal for the creation of a "Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality" (ZOPFAN) in South-east Asia. Subsequently, the proposal was endorsed by other ASEAN countries. Although Kampuchean conflict remains as an obstruction to the proposal for ZOPFAN, there is no visible opposition to the proposal from within the region altogether and no country came out with any alternative proposal. Therefore, the proposal for the creation of ZOPFAN still retains its validity as a programme of action.

In this backdrop, this article sets out to consider the relationship between conflict and regional order in South-east Asia and to examine the problems of and prospects for a viable system of regional order. To this end the article examines the sources of conflicts, interests and role of regional as well as external powers.

I

Numerous sources of internal and intra-regional conflicts in South-east Asia could be generalized in four categories:

- 1) Quest for appropriate model of socio-economic and political development;
- 2) Separatism and alien minorities;
- 3) Irredentism and unresolved state boundaries;
- 4) Historical antagonisms.

Quest for Appropriate Model of Socio-economic Development

National Liberation Movement in South-east Asian countries—Indochina and Indonesia in particular—attracted mass participation with diverse socio-political, ideological and class background. In some countries, intransigence of colonial powers led to sustained armed struggle. In the process of liberation movement, a significant part of anti-colonial forces was radicalized mainly due to the intransigence of colonial powers, notably, France in Indochina. Radical ideas also have flown from the USSR and to a greater extent from China. Japanese aggression against South-east Asian countries also contributed in the radicalization of South-east Asian politics. The appeals of distributive justice attracted a significant part of population alienated by poverty and gross disparities of private wealth. The outcome was a sharp division within the anti-colonial front. As expected, it took the form of a conflict between conservative and revolutionary forces. This conflict centered on the question of the most appropriate model of socio-economic and political development. Internal parities attracting external support favoured competing models of development which entailed not only alternative socio-economic systems but also alternative external alliance. In the process of such struggle, Indochinese Communist Party was able to assume the leadership of Nationalist Movement in Vietnam and thus posing a revolutionary challenge to Indochina and even beyond it. The subsequent developments polarized the regional forces and the external powers with interests and involvement in the region.

The Western powers, notably the US, could not reconcile to an internal transfer of power in Vietnam to the advantage of international communist movement. External support, mainly from the USSR and China, for internal revolutionary challenge has also been bestowed in Indochina. This conflict culminated in the US military intervention in Indochina which came to an inglorious end in April 1975 with the victory of communist forces.

Even, where in South-east Asia the transfer of power took place in a relatively peaceful atmosphere, the authority of the successor government was challenged by an insurgent communist groups which gathered strength during the course of the Pacific War. Burma, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines are cases in point. In Indonesia, where anti-colonial movement took the form of armed struggle, communist party enjoyed a tense co-existence with the mainstream of nationalist movement. But, unlike Indochina, nowhere in the region revolutionary forces could assume the leadership of nationalist movement or seize state power.

Present political crisis, that prevails in Philippines is pregnant with the prospects of confrontation among the internal parties with competing models of socio-economic development. The way, power was transferred from Marcos to Aquino did not resolve the crisis. It raised more questions than it answered. Though, Marcos and Gen. Verr are ousted from the country and some other pro-Marcos civil and military bureaucrats have also suffered from the political change, Mrs. Aquino now banks on the same civil-military bureaucracy that backed Marcos. Its loyalty to Aquino cannot be accepted unquestionably. One wellknown Philipino Marxist historian, Renato Constantino, even before elections predicted that "the post-Marcos era will be characterized by the same policies and programme ...only with a new set of actors and with just enough cosmetic changes to barely accommodate present popular dissent and beguile a majority of the citizenry"² In view of Aquino's unwillingness to undertake

2. See, G.V.C. Naidu, "The Philippine Communist Movement", *Strategic Analysis*, April, 1986, p. 62.

any radical programmes, the Philipino communists seem to subscribe to the above view. The Communists are a strong force in Philipino politics. Communist dominated National Democratic Front (NDF) had about 40,000 active organizers and a base of about six million Philipinos.³ Armed wing of the Communist Party, New, People's Army (NPA) has about 15,000 to 20,000 full-timers and about 10,000 part-timers.⁴

At present, the civil-military bureaucracy and allied forces have given their support to Aquino while the communists are showing a restrained opposition to her. The present crisis in the Philippines remains contained only, thanks to Mrs. Aquino's overwhelming popularity and her flexible approach towards the concerned parties. But situation in the country remains highly fragile. If Mrs. Aquino's popularity is undermined she could face a challenge from the civil-military bureaucracy, or if she identifies herself with the later she could alienate the Philipino populace thus increasing the support base of the communists. In any case communist insurgency is likely to be intensified. Though, there is no major indication of outside supports to insurgent forces, the prospects for a communist victory are heightened since assistance from regional or/and external communist powers could very well be forthcoming. In that event South-east Asia could again turn to be an arena of conflict between internal parties with alternative models of socio-economic and political development entailing also alternative external affiliation. In view of Kampuchea conflict some influential circles in South-east Asia are already reviving the relevance of the "domino theory".⁵ The US has major stakes in the Philippines and it has demonstrated a distinct willingness to retain her influence there at any cost.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

4. *Ibid.*

5. See, for Example, Lim Yoo-Yock, "The Indochina Situation and the Superpowers in South-east Asia" in Joyce E Larson (ed.) *New Foundations for Asian and Pacific Security*, (National Strategy Information Center, Inc. New York, 1980), PP. 51-53.

Rest of the non-communist South-east Asia seems to be stable both economically and politically. No government is facing any revolutionary challenge. Nowhere exists a communist party with tangible strength. China and Soviet-Vietnamese alliance both seem to be competing with each other to woo the ASEAN governments avoiding all sorts of linkages with the anti-government forces. These impressions are correct to a limited extent and are far from being indicative of long-standing economic and political stability. Rapid economic development by itself could sharpen the socio-economic and political conflicts. Moreover, in the recent years ASEAN economies are not faring well. Most of the regimes are authoritarian in nature which are inconsistent with the present stage of development in the region and the demand for greater popular participation could very well be in the forefront of political life. As the past history shows, insurgency has deep roots in South-east Asian political tradition and utopianism around distributive justice a respected place in its folklore. Present Chinese and Soviet-Vietnamese policy of wooing ASEAN governments is a result of following four factors :

- (i) Vietnamese entanglement in Kampuchea;
- (ii) Sino-Soviet and Sino-Vietnamese rivalry;
- (iii) Absence of any revolutionary movement in the region with prospects for victory;
- (iv) Their necessity of developing economic and if possible, political cooperation with the ASEAN countries.

None of these factors are compelling enough to desist the communist powers from supporting radical insurgency if otherwise it suits their interests. Particularly, if South-east Asia witnesses a new wave of revolutionary movement and there exist revolutionary forces with prospects for victory then it is not unlikely that the Communist powers would compete with one another for wooing the revolutionary forces.

Separatism and Alien Minorities

Democratisation of political boundaries in South-east Asia bears the imprint of its colonial past. As a result of the colonial policy as well as ethnographic circumstances the successor states in the region included within their bounds territorially based minorities, some of whom have been unwilling to reconcile themselves to political dominance from culturally alien majorities. Territorially-based minority dissidence expressed either in demands for autonomy or independence has severely tested the soundness of some states and generated tension between regional states. Occasionally, it has also attracted extra-regional involvement. As a result separatism has been a recurrent source of conflict within South-east Asia. Over time, the problem has been acute in Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. During late 1950s Indonesia witnessed an abortive separatist uprising which enjoyed US support whereby the USSR secured a measure of political advantage in Jakarta. Difficulties also arise between Malaysia and Thailand over the separatist activities of Muslims in the Southern provinces of Thailand bordering with the dominantly Muslim populated northern provinces of Malaysia.⁶ Present-day Philippines is facing the minority separatism as a major threat to its security. The open rebellion of Filipino Muslims has been initially sustained by support from the Malaysian states of Sabah.⁷ It has also attracted external support from the Islamic countries, especially and importantly, financial support from Libya.⁸ The problem will again test the integrity of Filipino state and the cohesion within the ASEAN.

Separatism as a source of conflict in South-east Asia has from time to time tested the integrity of a number of states, strained the

6. Michael Leifer, "Conflict and Regional Order in South-east Asia", *Adelphi Papers*, No. 162, pp. 6-7.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

intra-regional relations, attracted external involvement but it has always been limited in impact.

South-east Asia is also distinguished by immense cultural diversity which is made up, in part, of minorities without territorial roots within its post-colonial states. Most of them are ethnic Chinese who are seen all over the region. Besides, significant minorities from South Asia settled in Burma, Malaysia and Singapore.

A recurrent source of conflict and consternation in bilateral relations has been seen regarding overseas Chinese residents. They were readily accepted in Thailand, Kampuchea and the Philippines but they experienced a strong measure of social rejection in Malaysia and parts of Indonesia. In some countries, notably in Vietnam, the Chinese community is seen as a potential fifth column. It was one reason which accelerated the momentum of Sino-Vietnamese conflict during late 1970s.

Burmese treatment of Indian minorities in early 1960s resulted in a repatriation. Similarly, a large-scale exodus of Muslim residents of Bengali origin took place during 1977-78. In both the cases, the issues between the concerned governments were settled on a bilateral basis.

Although, the minorities without territorial roots in their states of residence are likely to remain as a irritant in intra-regional relations, they are unlikely to pose a challenge to the regional security, unless the issue is linked with other sources of inter-state feuds.

Unresolved State Boundaries and Irredentism

The present state boundaries of South-east Asian countries are mostly inherited from their colonial past. This inheritance has not been uniformly well-received by the successor states. On a number of occasions, post-colonial boundaries have been challenged in the form of irredentist claims. Claim by the government of the Philippines to the Malayasian state of Sabah is a strident example of irredentism. The present political crisis in the Philippines, particularly

the Muslim rebellion in her Southern islands severely circumscribed Manila's options on the issue. But it continues to remain a potential source of conflict in their bilateral relations.⁹

Spartly Archipelago in the South China Sea is another potential source of conflict to which China, Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines all lay claim. At present, Philipino troops are garrisoned on five islands, Vietnamese on three and Taiwanese on one.¹⁰ Vietnam has another territorial dispute with Indonesia over the ownership of Natuna Islands.¹¹ Besides, boundary issues have been a factor in relations between Malayasia and Brunei, Malayasia and Thailand, and China and Vietnam.

Historical Antagonisms

Bitter historical memories of the past—both, colonial and pre-colonial period—also contribute in the formulation of policy of a number of states vis-a-vis their neighbours in the region. The colonial domination by and large contained and subordinated historical antagonisms, between pre-colonial kingdoms, which comprised political rivalries and also deep-seated differences of culture and identity. On many occasions, colonial oppression gave rise to anti-colonial solidarity of the peoples in South-east Asia. But, the antagonisms among the South-east Asian countries rooted in the historical past have survived in conspicuous and politically relevant forms. The post-colonial revival of some pre-colonial antagonisms has had an undoubted impact on the course of conflict within the region. In particular, it has assumed a major source of conflict in the mainland South-east Asia.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

10. Bruce Grant, "The Security of South-east Asia", *Adelphi Papers*, No. 142, p. 20.

11. Howard M. Federspiel, "A Comparison of Security Concerns of Non-communist South-east Asian Nations in 1967 & 1983," *Indonesia Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1984, p. 53.

Sino-Vietnamese antagonisms have deep roots in the historical past. Over a number of centuries these two states had engaged in intermittent warfare with Vietnam seeking to defend her independence from a dominating China with mixed success. Since the recent outbreak of Sino-Vietnamese conflict ancient heroes of anti-Chinese struggle are being revived and glorified in contemporary Vietnamese writings. Vietnamese analysts very often refer to historical past. An influential Vietnamese analyst, Pham Binh, Director of the Vietnam Institute of International Relations, in a recent article, regarded China's policy as "two-thousand-year old policy of hegemonism" which view the South-east Asia as its "traditional area of expansion."¹² Vietnam has also bitter experience with some of its neighbours within ASEAN—particularly, the Philippines and Thailand—regarding their collaborationist role during the two Indo-China wars. In view of Kampuchea crisis, a recent Vietnamese article regarded Thailand as a "Trojan horse for the U. S. and French imperialists."¹³ Such perceptions are likely to influence the policy-makers, when they are relevant to the present context.

A similar pattern of relations has developed between Thailand and Burma. They were antagonists before the advent of colonialism and on occasions, this antagonism has been revived during the post-colonial period.

Present Indonesian policy towards China is being significantly influenced by the past role of China in the political turmoil of Indonesia during mid-1960s. Historical past was also an important, if not decisive factor, in Vietnamese-Kampuchea conflict.¹⁴

Although, on a number of occasions historical antagonisms were revived in politically relevant forms, pre-colonial antagonists have experienced a post-colonial relationship marked by alternating

12. Pham Binh, "New Possibilities for a Peaceful Solution to South-east Asia", *The Indonesia Quarterly*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, 1985, p. 198.

13. Hoang Hguyen, "South-east Asia : Confrontation or Accommodation", Vol. XII, No. 2, 1984, p. 188.

14. Michael Lufer, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

tensions and accommodation rather than by a sustained revival of historical conflicts.

A cursory attempt has been made to identify the main sources of regional conflicts in post-colonial South-east Asia. These sources of conflicts are in no sense mutually exclusive. Rather, most of the major conflicts witnessed by South-east Asia have been the outcome of a combination of a number of factors. The Kampuchean crisis being the latest example of this. It should also be taken into account that although the sources of conflict are rooted within the region, they generate conflicts of major significance only when the interests of major external powers become competitive. The major external powers can play such a decisive role in the occurrence and sustenance of conflicts in South-east Asia mainly due to the fact that the regional countries are still incapable of assuming a regulating role in regional relationship. Hence a detailed analysis of the role of regional as well as major external powers would follow.

II

Regional Countries : Acute Polarization

The new conflict in South-east Asia centered on the legitimacy of internal rule and external affiliation of Kampuchea. The assumption of power in Kampuchea by the Khmer Rouge under the leadership of Pol Pot was a national disaster. Pol Pot regime, being intolerant to all dissent embarked on a policy of mass terror against its own population with a view to building communism within a short span of time which alienated the Kampuchean populace. In international arena it maintained friendly relations only with China and a hostile attitude towards all of its neighbours. Vietnam on its part, neither could accept the legitimacy of Pol Pot regime which unequivocally opposed Vietnamese thrust to a dominant role in Indochina and repressed pro-Vietnamese elements in the Kampuchean Communist Party, nor could it reconcile with Pol Pot's affiliation with China with whom her relations were fast deteriorating. Meanwhile,

Pol Pot's misrule and practically a policy of genocide pursued by his regime, compelling thousands of its opponents to take refuge in Vietnam gave the latter the *casus belli*.

After a series of provocations from both sides, Vietnam intervened in Kampuchea in December 1978. It entered Phnom Penh in January 7, 1979, where it installed a new government more to its liking, headed by a former Khmer Rouge division commander Heng Samrin. To date, Vietnam is sustaining that government with the help of about 200,000 troops stationed in Kampuchea. Subsequently a 25-year Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation was signed between Vietnam and Kampuchea. It may be noted that a similar treaty between Vietnam and Laos has already been existing since July 1977 and about 50,000 of Vietnamese troops were stationed in Laos.¹⁵ Thus, the formal alliance relationship among the three Indochinese states with a patrimonial role of Vietnam came into being.

Vietnam's attempt to revise the correlation of forces within Indochina ushered in new political polarization in South-east Asia. In the diplomatic front concerted opposition to this attempt was expressed by all ASEAN governments and also that of Burma. But, the degree of opposition to which ASEAN governments were prepared varied depending on the strategic perspectives of the respective countries. For Thailand, the Vietnamese action revived the relevance of "domino theory". As it was not a match to Vietnam in terms of military might, Thailand neither could accept nor could attempt to revise the political *fait accompli* established by Vietnam. Such a predicament made Thailand feel a strong compulsion to sustain military resistance, together with an equally strong reluctance to become entangled directly in a military conflict. The main objective of this policy is the restoration of Kampuchea to a buffer status. Indonesia on her part has always

15. See Mizanur Rahman Khan, "The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea : A Solution", *BISS Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1982, p. 39.

perceived China rather than Vietnam as the principal source of long-term external threat to ASEAN countries. Rationale behind such perception was that :

- (i) In Indonesian view Vietnam's nationalism is the dominant value :
- (ii) She is not expansionist beyond Indochina and could not be so without direct collaboration of the Soviet Union ;
- (iii) and finally, her strength and vitality will serve to withstand undue pressure from China.

That is why, Indonesia, while publicly supporting Thailand, was anxious to ensure that Vietnam should not become unduly dependent on the USSR or unduly weakened by China. With this end in view, Indonesia maintained a line of communications with Hanoi.

Thus, Thailand and Indonesia could not work together in complete political harmony, for their priorities are not fully congruent. Other ASEAN countries as well displayed similar differences. Singapore's position was close to that of Thailand, while Malaysia shared the Indonesian view. The Philippines—torn by political crisis — while refused to endorse the political *fait accompli* in Kampuchea has been closer to Indonesia and Malaysia.

On the possible terms of a political settlement in Kampuchea also, the ASEAN countries held two differing positions. Indonesia and Singapore have demanded that Hanoi agree to withdraw from Kampuchea without any assurances of security for the Phnom Penh government of Heng Samrin.¹⁶ But Malaysia and Indonesia have argued within ASEAN for a compromise settlement that would involve a partial Vietnamese withdrawal, allowing the latter to maintain security in return for a Vietnamese agreement to a UN

16. Gareth Porter, "The United States and South-east Asia," *Current History*, December, 1984, pp. 437-38.

supervised free election. They have also sought to bring pressure on Thailand to be more flexible on the terms for a settlement.¹⁷ But, Vietnam on her part, was totally unreconciled to both of the positions held by ASEAN states which deprived her of taking advantage of the differences within ASEAN. It also compelled Indonesia and Malaysia to stand publicly by Thailand. Thus, during the period since Vietnamese troops crossed the Kampuchean border, political polarization in South-east Asia has been crystalized with Vietnamese dominated Indochina on the one side and the ASEAN countries on the other. But this polarization by itself was not responsible for the lack of constructive dialogue between the two groups of states on the terms of an orderly structure of mutual relationship between them. It was their inability to find out a mutually acceptable solution to Kampuchean problem that sustained the present state of confrontation between them. While failing to find out an acceptable settlement, both the sides were cautious enough not to escalate the low-intensity conflict in Kampuchea and demonstrated a strong reluctance to become entangled directly in a military conflict.

It could be pointed out here that sharp political polarization and even confrontation is not an inviolable obstacle in the way of establishing a peaceful order in a region. Europe and North America is a strident example to this. But the polarization of regional states is not the only evil in South-east Asia. External power rivalry also became attached to the conflict in Kampuchea, which to a significant extent served to sustain the conflict to its present stage and deprived the regional countries of the opportunity to find out a solution to the conflict. Hence an attempt would be made below to examine the interests and roles of external powers in South-east Asia.

17. *Ibid.* ; also, Sheldon Simons "Two South-east Asia and China : Security Perspectives", *Asian Survey*, May, 1984 pp. 527-528.

III

External Powers : Conflict of Interests

Since the post-War period, South-east Asia has always been a focal point of external power rivalry. It is primarily because of the fact that South-east Asia's economic and geostrategic importance and outcome of ongoing political struggle in the region go far beyond the region. Only the ASEAN countries produce 8.3 per cent of the world's total rubber output, 72 per cent of tin, 84 per cent of palm oil, 80 per cent of Manila hemp, 64 per cent of coconut products.¹⁸ South-east Asia has also important deposits of petroleum, natural gas and precious minerals. The region occupies an important strategic position at the crossroads of dozens of major sea and air routes including the Straits of Malacca—one of busiest international sea lanes. All these, made the region an arena of great power competition for preponderance.

For the purpose of our study we shall focus on the role of four major external powers viz the US, China, Japan and the Soviet Union as mainly these four external powers matter in South-east Asian developments.

The US

The United States has long shown a high concern for South-east Asia. But, since the US defeat in Vietnam, particularly, during the Carter Administration the US has taken a considerably low profile in the region. An array of reasons lies behind it : firstly, bitter memories of Vietnam war; secondly, the absence of armed conflict in South-east Asia and a relatively peaceful inter-state relations in the region, which discouraged external interference; and finally, the impact of the on-going process of East-West *detente*. But, the Kampuchea conflict and the subsequent developments in and around

18. V. Tomin, "The Expansion of Imperialism in South-east Asia," *International Affairs*, Moscow October, 1981, p. 81.

the region coupled with the deterioration in Super Power relations and the change of Carter Administration by a far more assertive one brought a significant change in US approach and practical policy towards South-east Asia. The Reagan Administration has viewed the developments in South-east Asia in terms of global Super Power rivalry. It sought to polarize the region between pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet forces. Kampuchea conflict provided the Reagan Administration with an unique opportunity to accomplish this objective. Unlike during pre-Vietnam period, the US no longer wants to be directly involved in the conflicts within Indochina. It rather wants to share the burden of present conflict in Indochina as well as that of facing the growing military and political influence of the Soviet Union in the East and South-east Asia with its friends and allies in the region, viz, the countries of ASEAN, China and Japan.

ASEAN countries have always been important to the US in terms of its broader political, strategic and economic interests. US trade across the Pacific now exceeds that (US trade) with all European countries. ASEAN as a group is the fifth largest US trade partner. American investments in the ASEAN countries total about \$6.3 billion.¹⁹ To safeguard its interests in the region the US maintains its Seventh Fleet there. It has also permanent military strongholds in Philippines (Subic Naval base and Clark air base). Besides, the US has stepped up military cooperation with Thailand and Singapore, although it is still facing opposition from Indonesia and Malaysia to its increased military role in the region. The US is also intensifying its military cooperation with China. In the political realm, all ASEAN countries are more or less inclined to the US. On the Kampuchea issue, both the US and the ASEAN countries intend to achieve a Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea, while there are differences between them on the terms of that

19. S. S. Bhattacharya, "The Malacca Straits : Zone of Growing Tension", *IDSJ Journal*, Vol. XVI, No. 2, October-November 1983, p. 174.

possible withdrawal and on what should be done if Vietnam does not withdraw.

The Reagan Administration viewed China as a useful counterweight to Soviet influence in Asia in general and in South-east Asia in particular. Therefore, cultivation of close political and military ties with China was a major policy objective of this Administration. Kampuchea conflict posed a larger strategic issue on which the two countries could cooperate. In the wake of the Kampuchean conflict, after a series of communication between the two governments, it became obvious that they have (almost) identical view in opposing Vietnam and the USSR in the region. The slow process of normalization of US-Vietnamese relations initiated during Carter Administration has already been stopped in view of the Kampuchea conflict. In June 1981, Reagan Administration reportedly reached an understanding with China that Vietnam should be weakened by prolonging the Kampuchea conflict and gradually strangling Vietnam through an economic boycott and finally, Vietnam would be forced to give up both its role in Kampuchea and its alliance with the Soviet Union.²⁰

Besides, in recent years—during Reagan Administration in particular—Japan has also been viewed by the US as a useful instrument in opposing Soviet and Vietnamese thrusts towards East and South-east Asia. That is why the US has been consistently pressing for substantial increase in Japan's defence budget. The US has also been putting pressure on Japan for more defence cooperation between themselves. In both respects, to a certain extent the US have been successful. Due to the US pressure and also pressure from influential circles within the country, Japan in recent years is gradually increasing its defence spending. US-Japanese joint naval exercises have also taken place.²¹

During the period since the outbreak of the Kampuchean, conflict the US has considerably improved its position in the East and South-

20. See Nayan Chanda, "Haig Turns the Screw", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June, 26, 1981, pp. 10-11.

21. S. S. Bhattacharga, *op. cit.*, p. 176

east Asia by isolating Vietnam and stepping up politico-military cooperation with China, Japan and some of the ASEAN countries. The present administration's policy towards Kampuchea is to maintain the existing polarization of the regional and external powers on the issue. Knowing fully well that such a policy would not be conducive to the settlement of Kampuchean issue, the administration is against any sort of concession to Vietnam as it does not see any immediate compulsion to do so.

China *✶ ✶*

During post-Vietnam period, Chinese policy towards South-east Asia underwent a drastic change. In terms of global power struggle China considerably tilted toward the US and adopted a friendly posture toward Japan and West Europe while maintaining a high degree of political and military confrontation with the USSR. In fact, opposing increasing Soviet influence all over the world in cooperation with the West became the prime concern of Chinese foreign policy. But, the implementation of this policy in South-east Asia was thwarted by Vietnam. Its past memory and a number of unsettled disputes with the US made Vietnam extremely anti-US and anti-West. And it adopted a firm stance of maintaining friendly relations with both, the USSR and China. Hence, initial Chinese policy towards South-east Asia become one of competing with the Soviet Union for influence in Indo-China while seeking a friendly relationship with ASEAN countries. But, this policy did not work, Vietnam and China were historical enemies. While China has traditionally viewed Indochina as its natural sphere of influence, Vietnam had long-standing ambition of bringing Indochina under its own domination. The interests of both the countries gradually came to a collision. Vietnam faced with a challenge from China in the way of achieving its long-cherished goal of uniting Indochina under its domination embarked on a policy of developing friendly relationship with the USSR on anti-Chinese basis. In 1977, Vietnam joined East bloc's economic organization, Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) which was

assailed by China.²² In 1978, Vietnam signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union. Vietnam also provided base facilities to the USSR.²³ Meanwhile, a large-scale exodus of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam to China seriously strained the relations between the two countries. Thus, already on the eve of Kampuchean conflict, Sino-Vietnamese rift and Soviet-Vietnamese alliance took a concrete shape.

The overthrow of Pol Pot and the installation of Heng Samrin regime in Kampuchea by Vietnam was taken by China as the end of its influence in Indochina and a severe blow to its prestige in regional and international politics. China severely condemned the Vietnamese action and demanded immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea. It also took a leading part in mobilizing international support against the continuous presence of Vietnamese troops in Kampuchea. Finally, China initiated a "punitive", invasion of northern Vietnam in 1979. If the invasion was designed to achieve a Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea or compelling Vietnam to give up its alliance relationship with the USSR then it fell far short of its objectives. Vietnam further strengthened its hold over Kampuchea and its alliance relationship with the Soviet Union. But the invasion convinced some ASEAN countries, Thailand in particular, that China is indeed prepared to take firm action against Vietnam, in case, if the latter invades Thailand.

During 1970s, Thailand, the Philippines and Malaysia granted China diplomatic recognition while Indonesia and Singapore refused. Kampuchean conflict and the subsequent developments further facilitated Beijing's friendly overtures toward the ASEAN countries. Among ASEAN countries, Thailand, faced with immediate threat of Vietnamese military power and strong pro-Chinese communist insurgency at home was most responsive to Chinese overtures. An improvement of

22. John Franklin Copper, "China and South-east Asia", *Current History*, December, 1984, p. 434.

23. Bernard K Gordon, "South-east Asia", in Kurt London (ed.) *The Soviet Union in World Politics*, (Westview Press Inc., 1980) pp. 175-180.

Thai-Chinese relations let the latter significantly reduce communist insurgency at home. But more important was the fact that Thailand could reach a kind of military arrangement with China envisaging Chinese assistance to Thailand in dealing with Vietnamese military intimidation. Several times, including the spring of 1984, when Vietnamese troops crossed Thai border, China escalated tension or provoked fighting on Sino-Vietnamese border, thus demonstrating the meaningfulness of the arrangement.²⁴ China has also been successful in improving its relations with the Philippines as well. But, it has been less successful in case of Malaysia. It was mainly due to the reason that Malayasia still perceives that China constitutes a greater threat to the region than Vietnam or the Soviet Union.²⁵ Singapore, while shares Chinese views regarding Vietnam, does not want to get too close to China with a view to avoiding domestic problems related to ethnic relations. Indonesian view with regard to the relative seriousness of Vietnamese, Soviet and Chinese threats to the region is similar to that of Malayasia and it also remain fearful of Chinese interference in its domestic affairs.²⁶ As a result, Chinese efforts to establish formal diplomatic relations with Indonesia have proven fruitless.

Despite all these differences, China and the ASEAN countries are more friendly and they have more common policies than they have had any time in the past.

On Kampuchean issue, China remains as intransigent as ever. As seen from Beijing any compromise to Vietnam would only let her legitimize its domination over Indochina. On the other hand, the sustenance of Kampuchean conflict would not involve any significant cost on the part of China, but, it would make Vietnam pay a high price in terms of material and human resources. In addition, it would further facilitate Chinese friendly overtures towards ASEAN countries

24. John Franklin Copper, *op. cit.*, pp. 406-408

25. *Ibid*

26. *Ibid*

while increasing the isolation of Vietnam and Soviet Union in the region.

Japan

Japan is another external power which sees high stakes for itself in South-east Asia. Its interests in the region are somewhat similar to those of its ally, the United States, but those are basically economic. Japan has now outpaced the US as the major trader and investor of South-east Asia. Japan's trade with the region was \$ 38.6 billion in 1981 and its investment in the region is estimated at \$ 7 billion which is about 48 percent of the foreign investment from developed countries in the ASEAN region.²⁷ Japan alone accounts for approximately 28.8 per cent of the overall ASEAN exports and 22.9 percent for imports.²⁸

In security matters, Japan is traditionally (since the World War II) dependent on the US. But in recent years, both due to pressure from the US and pressure from some influential circles within the country, Japan is trying to play a more important military role in the East and south-east Asia regions. But, it has not been well-received by a number of ASEAN countries. Particularly, Indonesia and Malaysia have already expressed their concern at Japan's militarisation plan.²⁹ Whatever change may take in Japan's defence posture, it is unlikely that it would embark on a major rearmament programme in the foreseeable future.

Regarding Kampuchean issue, Japan unequivocally expressed its opposition to Vietnamese military action. But, subsequently Japan gave the issue a considerably low profile.

27. S.S. Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, p. 176

28. See, Nguyen Hu Chinh, "Big powers vis-a-vis South-east Asia", *The Indonesia Quarterly*, Vol. XII, No. 2, 1984, p. 175.

29. S.S. Bhattacharya, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-78.

The Soviet Union

Historically, the Soviet Union has viewed South-east Asia as a region of secondary concern, where Moscow has pursued targets of opportunity and ideological commitments with a high degree of conservativeness in terms of taking risks. But, since the end of Indochina War, the USSR has been developing a more active interest in the region. Following two factors mainly contributed to this : firstly, the defeat in Vietnam severely reduced US influence in the region; South-east Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) ceased to exist and the US has shown a distinct unwillingness to intervene directly with troops in Asia as it was envisaged by the Nixon doctrine. All these created new opportunities for Soviet advancement with a relatively low cost. Secondly, following the end of Indochina war, historical antagonisms between China and Vietnam were gradually reviving in a politically relevant form and the latter looked up to the USSR for alliance relationship. The Soviet Union took full advantage of the Sino-Vietnamese rivalry in advancing its political and security interests in the region. With Vietnamese entrance into CMEA and Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation long-cherished Soviet goal of forging an alliance with Vietnam on anti-Chinese basis was achieved. In addition, Vietnam also provided the USSR with base facilities in Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay. Finally, Vietnam's sustained military presence in Kampuchea and Chinese intervention of northern Vietnam crystalized the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance. However, Soviet gains in Indochina involved high economic and even much higher political costs on its part. Soviet economic assistance to Vietnam has already reached the amount of about one billion US dollars annually.³⁰ In view of her sustained military involvement in Kampuchea and unsatisfactory performance of her economy Vietnam could very well be in need of additional assistance.

30. William J Duiker, "Vietnam in 1985 Searching for Solutions," *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1 January 1986.

Overwhelming diplomatic and political support and generous economic and military assistance rendered by the USSR to Vietnam severely thwarted Soviet quest for better relations with the ASEAN countries. Vietnam supported by the USSR has been looked upon by most of the ASEAN countries, Thailand in particular, as the principal threat to their security. Though Indonesia and to a lesser extent Malaysia continued to see China as the greater threat to the security of the region, still then they also vigorously opposed both the continued presence of Vietnamese troops in Kampuchea and Soviet military assistance to Vietnam.³¹ Sustained Soviet efforts to convince the ASEAN countries that China is the regional aggressor and that a Vietnamese controlled Indochina would ensure tranquility on the Thai border went in vain.³² ASEAN countries became more and more suspicious about Soviet and Vietnamese long-term intentions in the area and remained opposed to military cooperation between them. In February 1985, each ASEAN government aside from Brunei called in its resident Soviet ambassador to express concern that Moscow's military support of Vietnam was fuelling regional tensions.³³ The ASEAN countries hoped to get Moscow scale down its military aid to Vietnam as a price for improving relations with ASEAN.

The dilemma facing the Soviet Union in this regard is that continuation of its military assistance to Vietnam would further alienate the ASEAN countries. On the other hand, if it stops military assistance to Vietnam, the alliance relationship with the Soviet Union would be meaningless for the latter and the very existence of the alliance would be at stake. Moscow judged it expedient to continue with its policy of assisting Vietnam. Any change in its policy is unlikely. Therefore, any significant improvement in Soviet-ASEAN relations is far-fetched in the foreseeable future.

31. Sheldon W. Simon, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-81.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Donald S. Zagoria, "The USSR and Asia in 1985 : The First Year of Gorbachev," *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1, January 1986. p. 23.

In terms of its relations with external great powers in South-east Asia, the USSR is at odds with every one — China, the US and Japan. In addition, the latter three have developed an understanding to oppose any further Soviet move in the region and undermine Soviet influence there. The Soviets remain suspicious that, “the broadening of military political links of the USA with China and with Japan which is going in a direction of militarisation creates a long-term military threat to our eastern frontiers.”³⁴ They are apprehensive of a possible Sino-US-Japan *entente* directed against them.³⁵

Thus, the central issue which divides Vietnam and her clients in Indochina from the ASEAN countries also divides the external powers of global significance: the USSR on Vietnamese side and the US, China and Japan on ASEAN's side. This changed pattern of polarisation of regional and external forces is expected to dominate the South-east Asian politics for sometime to come. At the same time, it is not the final word in the regional politics altogether. Both the groups have divergent interests and perspectives and suffer from inner contradictions. Vietnam's domination over Kampuchea is based on sheer military force. Though, intra-ASEAN relations are relatively stable, nevertheless, within ASEAN there is a number of unresolved disputes. Moreover, internal political change also could bring change in foreign policy. The US-Japanese relations are suffering from sharp economic contradictions.³⁸ Present understanding among the US, China and Japan is based on sheer anti-Sovietism; therefore, it is bound to be fragile. Though, ASEAN's economic and to a lesser extent, political relations are oriented to the US and Japan, historical memories make the ASEAN countries concerned at the possibilities of the revival of Japanese

36. Marshal N. Ogarkov, quoted in *Strategic Survey 1981-1982*, (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 1982) p. 107-8.

37. See A.K.M. Abdus Sabur, “Sino-Soviet Relations: Quest for Rapprochement”, *BISS Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1983 pp. 51-52.

38. Paul H. Kreisberg, “The United States and ASEAN in 1985: More Problems, Fewer Solutions”, *Asian Survey* Vol. XXVI, No. 1, January 1986, p. 2.

militarism and suspicious about the US commitments. Besides, there are sharp differences between ASEAN countries and the US on a number of other issues such as US military presence in the region, Sino-US military cooperations, the role of Soviet presence in the region, Vietnam factor in regional politics and others. The longivity of Soviet-Vietnamese alliance remains open to question. Nationalism has deep roots in Vietnam and historically the country is opposed to dependence on outsiders. All these factors *en bloc* made the present pattern of polarisation open to question. The

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same factors made any future pattern unpredictable. Whatever change could occur in the pattern of regional alignment or in that of external involvement it could safely be pointed out that no power or group of powers, whether the combination is regional or external or both can expect to dominate South-east Asia. A power or group of powers that might expect to dominate the region would be resisted by another power or group of powers. None of them is disposed to allow others to dominate the region.

While external powers have divergent interests in South-east Asia, they are all concerned to preserve some kind of stability in the region. It is primarily to avoid their direct involvement in the regional conflicts. Vietnam's memories would make the US to do much to avoid another involvement in South-east Asian conflict. Japan from strictly military point of view is not in a position to become engaged in a conflict in the region. It would rather like to preserve its economic interests in a relatively peaceful atmosphere. The USSR engaged in a new spiral of arms race with the

US, bogged down in a protracted conflict in Afghanistan, and with her eagerness with the Middle East and Africa cannot involve herself directly in the South-east Asia—a region which is peripheral to her interests. Despite its intervention of Northern Vietnam in February 1979, China as well has shown a certain degree of unwillingness to involve itself militarily in South-east Asian conflicts. Despite all these, the external powers are far from finding out a *modus vivendi* in order to accommodate their competitive interests in the region. And the absence of a more deliberate relationship among them at present exists, the possibility always remains that they may be directly drawn into conflicts in the region.

Quest for a Viable Regional Order

Though the establishment of a peaceful and stable regional order in South east Asia is beyond the cooperative endeavours of the regional states alone, such initiative could come only from them. Any outside attempt to do so would have no credibility in the region and it might increase suspicion among the regional as well as external powers. But, South-east Asia for a long time has been deprived of the opportunity of initiating a process of regional order mainly due to the situation in and around Indochina. During early 1970s when Nixon-Kissinger diplomacy indicated a possible US disengagement in Indochina, Henry Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing in Mid-1971 opened some new opportunities for the South-east Asian nation to initiate a restructuring of their relations on peaceful foundations. Though prospects for US withdrawal from South-east Asia has been seen by some in the region in terms of "vacuum of power" theory, to most of them this possible withdrawal was looked upon as a new era in which the South-east Asian nations should take upon themselves the responsibility in ensuring regional security and stability. For the absence of Superpower rivalry in the region will be more conducive to lay the foundation of peace and stability in the

region. This idea within a very short time not only became overwhelmingly prevailing in the ASEAN states but also became plan of their action. It was given a concrete expression in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration of 1971, signed by the ASEAN foreign ministers. The Declaration recognized "the right of every state, large or small, to lead its national existence free from outside interference in its internal affairs as this interference will adversely affect its freedom, independence and integrity", and stated that the member states of ASEAN are determined to exert initially necessary efforts to secure the recognition of, and respect for, South-east Asian as a "Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality", free from "any form or manner of interference by outside powers"³⁹ The principle of rejection of external interference as well as the idea of South-east Asia as ZOPFAN was reaffirmed in the subsequent forums of ASEAN and became a fundamental policy of these states.

ZOPFAN idea as conceived by ASEAN states was designed to prevent South-east Asia from becoming an arena of international conflicts, to resolve existing and potential disputes on a peaceful basis which would be conducive to regional peace and mutually beneficial cooperation. As we have seen, South-east Asian conflicts have two aspects: firstly, they are rooted within the region, secondly, their occurrences very often invite external major power involvement which contributes to the complication and the sustenance of these conflicts depriving the regional countries of the opportunity to resolve them. In South-east Asia, deep suspicion persists that the existence of regional conflicts and the lack of a peaceful and stable regional order could make the region suffer even more as it did in the past as great powers would move and manoeuvre in pursuit of major interests to which South-east Asia could even be peripheral. In that case the regional countries could serve as proxies of their patrons and fight for the cause that is inimical to their interests.

39. Soedjati Djiwandano, "The Long-term Strategy of the South-east Asian Countries : The Case of Asean", *The Indonesia Quarterly*, Vol. XII, No. 2, 1984, p. 197.

In the light of above circumstances, the idea of ZOPFAN as it was mooted was meant to be a framework of a peaceful and stable regional order in South-east Asia circumscribing the competitive involvement of major external powers. It had two major objectives: firstly, the restructuring of intra-regional relations on a peaceful basis, which means that the regional countries should be able to avoid internal and intra-regional conflicts and solve such existing conflicts peacefully and without inviting external parties to them. Second objective is the circumscription of the competitive involvement of extra-regional powers in South-east Asian conflicts. It envisages that the major external powers—Super Powers in particular—should not look at South-east Asian developments in terms of their competition for a predominant role in the world or in this particular region. None of them should take the advantage of South-east Asian conflicts or attempt at a predominant position or influence in the region at the cost of regional or other external powers. It also envisage the withdrawal of foreign military bases from the region.

Concerning the question, whether the idea is realistic or not, some ASEAN analysts are quite optimistic that the idea could be imple-

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mented gradually over a period of time. Indeed a peaceful and stable environment conducive to socio-economic development has already been achieved within the ASEAN.⁴⁰ Concerning the existence of

40. Yusuf Wanandi, "ZOPFAN and the Kampuchea Conflict", *The Indonesia Quarterly*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, 1985, p. 207

foreign military bases in and their alliance relationship with the South-east Asian countries, they suggest that the regional countries concerned must be given time to reorient their foreign policies, just as external powers would need to reorient their foreign policies for accepting the idea of ZOPFAN⁴¹.

When in November, 1971, the ZOPFAN proposal was mooted the initial reaction of external powers has been cool. The US has shown no interests and Japan has been non-committal,⁴² China was extremely cautious.⁴³ While the USSR was initially skeptical, Vietnam and Laos vigourously opposed the idea.⁴⁴ During the last fifteen years since the idea was mooted, a remarkable change in favour of the idea occurred in Chinese,⁴⁵ Vietnamese⁴⁶ and Soviet⁴⁷ positions. Whether the US would be prepared to withdraw its bases from the Philipinnes in exchange of the withdrawal of Soviet bases from Vietnam remains to be seen. But, there is no visible opposition, in the region or outside, to the idea of ZOPFAN and till now no country came out with any alternative proposal. That is why, the proposal still remains in the focus of attention.

Following the end of Vietnam war, some moves were initiated in the positive direction. External power's presence in South-east Asia was less visible and a process of negotiation was initiated to normalize the relations between the Indochinese countries on the one hand and the ASEAN countries on the other. But the emergence of conflict over Kampuchea and the subsequent polarization of the regional countries and the intensification of

41. Soedjati Djwandano, *op. cit.*, pp. 198-9.

42. Bruce Gant, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25

43. Takashi Tajima, "China and South-east Asia : Strategic Interests and Policy Prospects", *Adelphi Papers*, No. 172, London, 1981, p. 16.

44. Sheldon W. Simon, "The Soviet Union and South-east Asia : Interests Goals and Constrains," *Orbis*, Spring 1981, pp. 75-76.

45. Takashi Tajima, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

46. Sheldon W. Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

47. *Ibid*, p. 75.

the competitive involvement of major external powers in the region severely thwarted the quest for a peaceful and stable regional order in South-east Asia. Therefore, prior to taking further initiatives aimed at implementing the idea of ZOPFAN, it is imperative to find out solution to Kampuchea problem acceptable to both, regional countries and concerned external powers.

Prospects for the Future.

Present situation prevailing in South-east Asia is marked by the existence of a protracted armed conflict, numerous sources of potential conflicts, an acute polarization of the region, mutual distrust and the lack of cohesion among the regional countries with a parallel quest for a peaceful and viable regional order. Although, the conflicts are rooted within the region, the present momentum of conflict is sustained by the competitive involvement of major external powers which is successfully depriving the regional states from working out for themselves an orderly structure of mutual relations. Therefore, the prospects for a peaceful and viable regional order in South-east Asia would depend not only on the regional states but also on the major external powers.

But the main responsibility lies with the regional states. The main guarantee of peace and stability in South-east Asia is the absence of conflict between the regional states or at least their ability to resolve them without inviting extra-regional involvement. In this regard no positive development has taken place; Kampuchean problem is far from being resolved. External power rivalry has been enmeshed with regional conflict. Apart from Kampuchean issue, there remains a number of potential sources of conflicts. In the positive direction there is a genuine urge among the regional states to find out a code of conduct which might ensure regional peace and stability and restrict the involvement of external powers in the regional affairs.

Another precondition of peace in South-east Asia is the absence of conflict between the four major external powers *viz.* the US,

the Soviet Union, China and Japan. If conflicts and rivalry between them become intense, South-east Asia will suffer due to its inherent vulnerability to great power involvement. On the other hand, conflict between the regional countries, if unattended by the great powers, is unlikely to affect the stability of the region as a whole. In this

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regard, it also should be taken into account that, on the evidence of its history and its geopolitical situation South-east Asia cannot insulate itself from great-power relationships. What is expected from them is that they should agree on a code of conduct which might end their competitive involvement and thus, enable the regional states to work out for themselves a viable and orderly structure of mutual relationship. Thus, the idea of ZOPFAN, while aims at reducing or restricting the level of great-power involvement, recognized their legitimate interests and leaves room for their proper involvement in the region.

The situation is not frustrating altogether. Whatever in their mind, none of the major external powers is now openly opposing the idea of ZOPFAN. In addition, some of them, from time to time are giving lip services to it. It is an indication (of the fact) that they are compelled to respect the urge of South-east Asian countries for peace and stability in the region. In the circumstances new moves could be initiated by the regional countries aimed at both, the settlement of existing and potential conflicts in the region, Kampuchea problem in particular, and for the gradual implementation of the idea of ZOPFAN. While, Vietnam is bogged down in a protracted conflict in Kampuchea and suffering from a lack of credibility both in the region and outside it, ASEAN could take such an initiative.