

MALAYSIA AND THE EARLY YEARS OF ZOPFAN

Nicholas Tarling¹

Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the concept of a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in Southeast Asia which was advanced in the early 1970s by Malaysia under the leadership of Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak. The concept envisaged the neutralisation of Southeast Asia to strengthen the security of the region. The neutralisation of Southeast Asia would be guaranteed by the big powers such as the United States, Soviet Union and China. Drawing mainly from archival sources in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, the article reveals the underlying rationale for the proposed concept and the nature and complexity of the debates between the five Southeast Asian nations in ASEAN, including some reservations held by certain members before an agreement was signed by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers in Kuala Lumpur in November 1971.

Keywords: Neutralisation, security, ASEAN, Malaysia, ZOPFAN, Southeast Asia

With the disappearance of the imperial structures that had dominated Southeast Asia, newly-independent states had to develop foreign policies of their own. So far few, if any, have been willing to allow historians to explore the documentary evidence that has no doubt been preserved. Somewhat paradoxically, they must turn to the archives of external powers, which largely follow a thirty-year rule. Their diplomats were indeed often keenly interested in collecting information from ministers, on the golf course or otherwise, and from officials, who might convey or leak it more or less straightforwardly. In my recent book, *Regionalism in Southeast Asia*, I was able to incorporate material from United Kingdom records on the development of the South East Asia Friendship and Economic Treaty (SEAFET), the Association of South East Asia (ASA), and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). I have been turning more recently to the material in the New Zealand archives, which contain not only reports from New Zealand diplomats but also from Australian and Canadian diplomats as well. They have both supported and modified my conclusions. In this article I take up the concept of ZOPFAN, the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality in Southeast Asia, advanced at a time when Britain had withdrawn the bulk of its forces from the region and the United States had begun to come to terms with the People's Republic of China.

Origins of the idea

Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, former Minister of Home Affairs, had in fact presented the idea in a debate on defence in the *Dewan Rakyat* back in January 1968, his aim being to save money that could be spent on social services.

¹ Dr Nicholas Tarling is Emeritus Professor at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. This article is based on his lecture given at the Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, on 15 November 2007.

The time is ... ripe for the countries in the region to declare collectively the neutralization of South-East Asia. To be effective, the neutralization ... must be guaranteed by the big powers, including Communist China ... it is time that the countries in South-East Asia signed non-aggression treaties with each other. Now is also [the] time for the countries in South-East Asia to declare the policy of co-existence, in the sense that the countries in the region should not interfere in the internal affairs of each other and [should undertake] to accept whatever form of government a country chooses to elect or adopt.¹

Tunku Abdul Rahman, the prime minister, did not think the time had come, but Tun Abdul Razak, his deputy, thought the concept 'wise, imaginative and far-sighted',² and he came to power after the 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur.

'It is Malaysia's hope', Tan Sri Ghazali bin Shafie of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated at the Preparatory Non-Aligned Conference at Dar-es-Salaam in April 1970, 'that non-aligned countries will be able to endorse the neutralisation of not only the Indo-China area but of the entire region of Southeast Asia, guaranteed by the three major powers, the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union and the United States, against any form of external interference, threat or pressure'.³ Just before he became prime minister in September 1970, Razak repeated the call at Lusaka at the Non-Aligned conference itself. 'It is my hope that in reaffirming the right of self-determination and non-interference in the Indo-China area, the Non-Aligned Group would at the same time take a positive stand in endorsing the neutralisation of the area and possibly of the entire region of Southeast Asia, guaranteed by the three major powers.'⁴

Ismail, now Deputy Prime Minister, led the Malaysian delegation at the 4th ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting (AMM) in Manila in March 1971. 'The tragedy of Vietnam', where, despite the Paris peace talks, no settlement was in sight and war continued to 'wreak havoc', was, he declared on 12 March, 'a telling testimony to the dangers of big power interference, involvement or intervention in the internal affairs of small countries'. The lesson of the war was clear: 'big powers should leave small countries to themselves, to evolve their own systems of government and to work out their own programmes for progress and prosperity'. With Vietnam in mind, 'together with the withdrawal of the American and British from Southeast Asia', Malaysia advocated 'a policy of neutralisation for Southeast Asia to be guaranteed by the big powers, viz. the US, the U.S.S.R. and the People's Republic of China. The policy is meant to be a proclamation that this region of ours is no longer to be regarded as an area to be divided into spheres of influence of the big powers. It may be regarded as a project to end or prevent small countries in this region from being used as pawns in the conflict between the big powers. The policy of neutralisation represents a programme to ensure stability and preserve peace in this area so that we may get on with the urgent task of developing our countries and improving the wealth and welfare of our people.'⁵

In a speech in July 1971 Prime Minister Razak argued that the involvement of major powers was the essential reason Southeast Asia had not been at peace for twenty years. Peace and security could be safeguarded only by 'a policy of neutralisation which will ensure that this region will no longer be a theatre of conflict for the competing interests of the major powers'. That required that the states in the region had to 'work to bring about the conditions which are necessary for the realisation of the neutralisation proposed and

show that a neutralised Southeast Asia meets the basic legitimate interests of the great powers themselves'. Malaysia's 'vision' was of 'a Community of Nations ... When we look at the map of Asia, it is possible to see that Southeast Asia is a clear and coherent unit which through the vicissitudes of history has not been able to play its proper part in the world.'⁶

In October 1971 Ghazali published a defence of the proposal and outlined the steps Malaysia envisaged for implementing it.⁷ At the first level, he argued, the individual countries of the region must 'respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and not participate in activities likely to directly or indirectly threaten the security of another. Non-interference and non-aggression are basic principles which Southeast Asian countries must unequivocally accept before any further steps can be taken.' All foreign powers were to be 'excluded from the region, which 'should not be allowed to be used as a theatre of conflict in the international power struggle'. The countries of the region should ensure peace among member states, and present 'a collective view before the major powers on vital issues of security' and 'promote regional cooperation'.

The role of the major powers

At the second level, the three major powers had to agree that Southeast Asia was 'an area of neutrality', and 'undertake to exclude countries in the region from the power struggle amongst themselves'. They should 'devise the supervisory means of guaranteeing Southeast Asia's neutrality in the international power struggle. Just as the Southeast Asian countries will be responsible, under the neutralisation plan, for maintaining peace among themselves, so will the guaranteeing powers be responsible for preventing externally-inspired conflict in the region'.⁸ The British High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur, Sir J. Johnston, believed that the Malaysians were seeking a formulation of Southeast Asian neutrality 'which the Chinese would find it difficult not to respect, but which would leave South East Asian countries free to maintain their traditional connections'. If 'anything constructive' emerged, the Malaysians would look to their friends 'to applaud their efforts to promote stability', and France and other countries would be 'swift to endorse the concept of a neutral South East Asia'. Britain, he suggested, should let it be known 'that we welcome any policies that contribute to the peace and stability of an area with which we have so many ties'.⁹

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in London thought that it would be able to take a positive attitude to a declaration of neutralisation which the Chinese would find it difficult not to respect, but which would not inhibit regional cooperation or 'the freedom of South East Asian countries to maintain arrangements with friendly powers which they think necessary for their security'. But the suggestion that external powers - presumably US, Soviet Union, PRC - should 'underwrite' it would be difficult to endorse publicly. 'There is a distinction between self-denying ordinances whereby the great powers would undertake not to interfere in the affairs of South East Asian countries and to respect their territorial integrity, sovereignty and existing systems of government and an international agreement (which in itself would give the outside signatories a *droit de regard* in the area) under which each great power would guarantee the neutrality of countries in the area. A positive agreement of this sort would involve reconciliation of differing interests of the powers concerned to an extent which is not practical politics at present. It could also involve weakening of existing Western position in the area. Furthermore, Malaysians

would presumably want above all to obtain undertakings by China not to support Communist subversive movements in the area: we cannot expect the Chinese to give any undertakings of this sort in the foreseeable future.’¹⁰

Discussions in ASEAN

The ASEAN foreign ministers met in Kuala Lumpur 26-27 November 1971 and signed a declaration announcing their agreement ‘that the neutralisation of Southeast Asia was a desirable objective’ and that they should ‘explore ways and means of bringing it about’. The preamble alluded to United Nations principles, the Bandung conference of 1955, and the Bangkok declaration of 1967 that had founded ASEAN, and took cognizance of the move towards nuclear-free zones in Africa and Latin America. The declaration itself stated that Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand were ‘determined to exert initially necessary efforts to secure the recognition of, and respect for, Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers’.¹¹ A joint communique indicated that the ministers would encourage other countries in Southeast Asia to associate themselves with the declaration and would establish a committee of senior officials ‘to study and consider what further steps should be taken’. Great powers and guarantees were not mentioned.

The New Zealand High Commission in Kuala Lumpur had been clear that it would be difficult for the five countries to reach agreement on the items on the agenda of the meeting. Malaysia wanted the goal of neutralisation to be accepted ‘as completely and unambiguously as possible’, but did not consider it was opportune to try to coordinate the countries’ policies towards China, and thought President Marcos’ concept of an Asian summit would damage the development of ASEAN and neutralisation. Thailand was hesitant about neutralisation, preferring ‘a watered-down “declaration of South East Asia as a zone of peace”’. Indonesia was ‘sceptical of Malaysia’s ideas and fearful that they would drag the region precipitately into Peking’s arms. In particular, Indonesia opposed the “Great Power guarantee” idea, preferring that the region’s security be guaranteed from within rather than from without. There were hints that the Indonesians were the only delegation even prepared to contemplate an eventual ASEAN military alliance. ... The preponderance of senior military men in the Indonesian delegation ... indicated that the Indonesian military leadership did not quite trust [Foreign Minister Adam] Malik not to become infected with the Malaysians’ enthusiasm.’ Singapore stressed the need for existing relationships to continue until neutralisation was ‘an accomplished reality’. Officials began discussions on 25 November, before them a Malaysian paper on neutralisation, and Indonesian one on relations with China, a draft declaration of neutrality prepared by the Thais, and a general review from Singapore. Only at a social function with the ministers in the evening did the atmosphere grow positive. ‘“We got all the Ministers sitting on sofas together and let bonhomie take over”, a Malaysian official told us later.’

Officials were subsequently instructed ‘to concentrate on hammering out a Declaration dealing with the *goal* of neutralisation, and to forget about the divisive issue of the *means* by which neutralisation was to be achieved’, and told that there had to be documents which all could endorse. ‘This display of “good jokerism” enabled a fairly bland Declaration and Communique ... to be hatched.’

A vague declaration

The Declaration was 'vague, harmless', the New Zealanders reported, showing 'how low the meeting had to go to achieve unanimity'. In the phrase of the Japanese ambassador, it was like a drink in a hotel lounge: 'very little whisky and a lot of fizzy water'. But it had 'something for everyone'. Agreement to hold an ASEAN summit in Manila saved Philippines face. 'The Singaporeans were catered for by the establishment of an officials' committee to define and give scope to the meaning and content of neutrality.' The Indonesians knocked out any reference to great power guarantees. 'Malaysia has the references to the goal of neutralisation to show for her efforts.' Thailand's phrase 'a zone of peace' had its place in the declaration.

The Malaysians professed not to be 'disheartened. ... They say they expected no more and are content that a start has been made. "The essential achievement of the meeting", a high Malaysian official told us, "was collectively to express the long range objectives of the five ASEAN countries with reference to the promotion of stability and security in South East Asia." Razak told a press conference that the Declaration indicated that the Southeast Asian countries were determined to shape their own destiny. 'Malaysia expects it to take a good few years for any neutralisation of the region to be within its grasp', but 'feels ... that the steps that have been agreed as necessary to keep up momentum are definite enough to be adequate'.

There was no reference to a great power 'guarantee', but Malaysian statements continued to refer to it as 'a final stage of the process of securing neutralisation'. Reports from Moscow suggested that the government there saw it as 'an American-inspired manoeuvre'. The Malaysian Secretary-General of Foreign Affairs thought neutralisation would 'suit China's book'. The Australians had been concerned that they were excluded from a major initiative, but dropped a notion of sending up a senior official to be 'in the corridors'.

The Kuala Lumpur Accord, R.M. Hutchens concluded, showed that the five ASEAN nations were prepared 'to address themselves as a group to the problem of the future political shape of the region'. What emerged was 'general and watered-down', but could be used 'as a basis for the "five" to feel their way towards something more solid'. Whether it would be so used was less certain. 'The meeting represented their first collective effort to grapple with the shifting Asian power-balance. The chances are that the Kuala Lumpur Accord will not get written up in the history books as a milestone, but if it does, it may appear there as marking the genesis of a "South East Asian bloc".'¹²

The fifth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting was held in Singapore in April 1972. The communiqué, as the New Zealand High Commission reported, noted that ministers reviewed international developments that made it more than ever necessary for ASEAN countries to cooperate. That was 'an oblique reference' to an agreement reached on 14 April that ministers should, as proposed by the Singapore Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam, convene once a year to discuss international developments. Such meetings 'would be outside the purview of ASEAN and would preserve their informal character'. The permanent secretary of the Singapore Foreign Ministry would not say what had been discussed, but the inference was that they had covered Chinese policies in the region. 'He still maintained the old line that ASEAN was "not a political organisation".'

The meeting on 15 April dealt with neutralisation. The Malaysians circulated two papers. One set out a programme of action designed to give substance to the concept of Southeast Asia as 'a zone of neutralisation', no reference being made to 'a zone of peace, freedom and neutrality', and included a series of questions on the role ASEAN, as at present or enlarged, might play in developing the concept. The second contained the text of a model treaty, drawn from a book by Falk et al written 'three or four years ago' on ASEAN neutralisation. The Malaysians suggested that officials should discuss their papers at a meeting in KL in May. The other four delegations preferred to prepare their own papers. 'Our informant commented that the Malaysians, while urging action, seemed less determined than previously. He wondered whether they, having already gained considerable mileage among the "non-aligned" nations but receiving "a fairly rough time" from the Indonesians in the process, might now prefer to hasten more slowly.'¹³

Singapore had traditionally opposed any attempt to give ASEAN a political role, the High Commissioner commented, 'on the grounds that accord would be difficult to reach, and would risk rending the agreement already obtained on economic objectives'. But Rajaratnam 'had concluded that the trend started late last year with the talks about China's entry to the United Nations, the agreement to consult each other before pursuing relations with Peking, and the November meeting in Kuala Lumpur on neutralisation, and continued more recently in the discussion of Bangladesh recognition could not be halted and should, in some flexible fashion, be institutionalised'. The ministers met in private, without advisers, on the matter. The Singapore MFA had included in the draft statement only one paragraph, 'simply noting the agreement to meet at least annually'. That was not enough for Malaysia and the Philippines, and the final declaration referred specifically to the KL declaration and communique.¹⁴

The Thais, the New Zealand embassy in Bangkok reported, did not seem 'as concerned as some others that these political meetings should be outside ASEAN's formal framework, but neither are they troubled by the artifice'. Foreign ministry officials were concerned over American policy, the chargé added. The US was 'engaged in a global policy of withdrawal and it is prepared to see, at least in South East Asia, the expansion of Communism rather than intervene directly to prevent it'; it was, 'in view of at least some Thai officials, a rather unreliable ally'. Thai views on neutralisation had to be put in that context. Thanom told visiting members of the US War College that neutrality was 'an empty concept: if China is involved, he said, there can be no guarantee that the commitment will be honoured; if China is not involved, there can be no guarantee at all.' Foreign Ministry officials held out more hope. 'They are less convinced that the Chinese, despite their support for insurgency, nurse expansionist aims in South East Asia and have not failed to notice the gap between Chinese rhetoric and action. They see the objective as a worthwhile one and the road ahead as being long and difficult but they are prepared to explore seriously any option that holds a promise of long-term security while retaining for the present established alliances.'¹⁵

In Wellington the ministry prepared an account of the development of the proposal and commented on its prospects. The neutralisation of Southeast Asia was an idea that was 'superficially attractive' and might have 'some real merit', but was 'extraordinarily difficult to put into practice'. The involvement of the area in great power politics arose from divisions and conflicts within it, and while those persisted, there would always be incentives for the great powers to intervene. If they agreed to guarantee its neutrality, 'it

would almost certainly be in the hope of playing a larger part in its affairs, and the result would probably be the reverse of what was intended.' It was not an objective that New Zealand could at that stage endorse or advocate.

It was, however, 'desirable that the countries of the area should work more closely together and take more responsibility for the security of the area. It is also desirable that they should think out for themselves the reasons for their involvement with the great powers and their inability to achieve the goal of neutrality.' The proposal was already serving a useful purpose 'in giving the Malaysians an incentive to talk more to their neighbours, including Singapore, about the security problems of the area, and to take their views into account'. In the longer term there might be more scope. 'If and when a negotiated settlement is reached in Indochina, and that area is to some degree neutralised, and if the arrangement proves durable, there may be some possibility of extending it cover the whole of South-east Asia. But the "if" are big ones, and the "may" is very tentative.'¹⁶

Many miss the point, the Canadian High Commission suggested, that the Malaysian government was not promoting neutralisation for tomorrow 'but rather for an indeterminate date in the future when the USA's role in this part of the world has diminished, the five power defence arrangements are over and China, Japan and Indonesia are exerting the major influence in the region'. Razak, the Commission noted, had spoken in the past of guarantees, but the Declaration used the words 'recognise' and 'respect'. The Malaysian Foreign Ministry spokesman 'indicated that the use of "recognize" was calculated and meant to imply the recognition of Southeast Asia's neutrality in the same way that all recognized Switzerland's neutrality. To "guarantee" the area's neutrality could imply a role for the super powers to police the guarantee and presumably the countries of the region do not wish this.' Malaysia did not see a military pact as a result, but it did not rule out 'the possibility that at some future date when all or nearly all the countries of the region have adhered to the declaration and the neutrality of Southeast Asia has been recognized (guaranteed) one country might request the military help of another or even several others if its neutrality is threatened by outside influences.' Such issues would be discussed when officials met.¹⁷

At that meeting, held in Kuala Lumpur 6-8 July 1972, Malaysia produced a detailed paper, including a draft treaty. That took the others aback, and it was decided to focus on the 'initial steps' to which the Declaration had referred. A working group defined 'peace', 'freedom' and 'neutrality' and the meaning of a 'zone of peace, freedom and neutrality'. There were differences over 'neutralisation', used in the preamble of the Declaration. Was it the end or the means to an end or a means to the end? The Malaysians were asked to reformulate their ideas.¹⁸

A meeting of Foreign Ministers was held in Manila the following week. After it, Carlos Romulo of the Philippines told the Australian ambassador that neutralisation had been the main topic. It was seen, he implied, as one means towards establishing the zone. 'Asked to distinguish between "neutrality" and "neutralisation"', he said that 'neutrality was that condition under which a state maintained its independence of, and impartiality towards, the great powers. Neutralisation was the condition of a neutral state whose status was guaranteed by the great powers.' He agreed 'that it could be argued that neutralisation, on this definition, derogated from the independence of the neutral state and that it was hard to see how it could be a means to the end goal of neutrality'. As

for other means of attaining that goal, Romulo spoke of the possibility of a unilateral declaration being made by the ASEAN countries that they constituted a zone of "peace, freedom and neutrality".'

Romulo thought it might take 10-15 years to reach the goal. 'Essentially he regarded the exercise ... as a form of contingency planning.' The ASEAN countries 'had to prepare for the eventuality that the United States no longer maintained bases in the region and agreements between, for example, the Philippines and the United States and the five power arrangements had been phased out'. With respect to disputes among member states, they were 'aiming to establish a situation akin to that now existing among the countries in Western Europe, i.e. the exclusion of war as a means of resolving their differences'. Their harmony was already substantial, and Romulo played down Sabah as a source of friction.¹⁹

The Australian High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur thought the meeting had been a setback for the Malaysians, but they were determined to push ahead. At the Ministry Zainal said they wanted to have something in place when the defence agreements came to an end. 'It was also urgent because of the whole way things were moving, the development of the United States/China relationship, events in Korea, with the latest contacts between north and south, and in particular Vietnam.' There was an opportunity that might not last 'to develop a regional agreement which could secure endorsement and support from the great powers'. The High Commissioner questioned whether great powers would live up to statements they made. It was clear that Zainal had China in mind, and 'felt that, unless progress could be made towards securing statements of good behaviour from the Chinese which would provide a "guaranteed norm" for Chinese behaviour and which could lead, if contravened, to counter-intervention by the great powers, if so asked by the Southeast Asian state or states concerned: then each country would be left to make the best deal it could with China – in the absence of any real American support post-Vietnam.'²⁰

Defining neutralisation

'Neutralisation 'can mean different things to different people,' Rowland suggested; 'it offers a long-term objective without giving a realistic account of how to reach it'. That enabled Malaysia to 'look nonaligned while not altering the present realities of foreign support in the region'; a "'smokescreen" aspect' to their proposal. But they also saw it as a guide to future policy. Neutralisation was 'not intended to open the way to Chinese or Communist domination, but is regarded as the best strategy of defence. It emerged not only from the domestic need of the leadership under a new Prime Minister ... for a "new look", but also from Malaysia's twin preoccupations of Communist insurgency and relations with China, in the situation arising from the continuing war in Indochina, the British withdrawal, the Guam doctrine, and now the Nixon visit. Though Malaysia feels that it has no alternative internationally but non-alignment, it cannot but be anti-communist in fact.' There was 'some tendency' in KL 'to overestimate the likely extent of American withdrawal'. But the Malaysians also believed that 'the best way in practice to preserve or even attract American support is not to put up a public appearance of relying on it, but rather to display independence and self-reliance, for which "neutralisation is another name"'. At the Manila meeting, however, 'the Malaysian ideas apparently ran more or less completely aground'. But the neutralisation idea was 'a useful and creative

one', and it might over a period be adapted to 'a more realistic form', emphasising the aspect of regional strength and self-reliance.²¹

Officials met in Jakarta in December. They 'sought to establish the principles on which neutralisation should be set up and to consider the ways of promoting the conditions in which a zone of peace would prosper and survive', Albert Talalla of the Malaysian Foreign Ministry said. 'They ... succeeded in establishing a code of conduct for states both within and outside the region and they had made some progress on lines of action for the promotion of the zone.' The guidelines were to be referred to the Foreign Ministers, perhaps at their regular meeting in April. He admitted that there was a long way to go. 'In particular time had not permitted the completion of their study of guarantees or on the mechanism of conflict resolution (and this, of course, could be much more contentious).' But he was pleased with the cooperation received: even the Singaporeans were in a 'less argumentative frame of mind'.²² The report did not refer to great power guarantees, but that, the New Zealand High Commission in Singapore later learned from a MFA official, Goh Khiam Chee, did not mean that the idea had been abandoned, but that the current focus was on the zone.²³

The AMM held in Bangkok in April 1973 endorsed the guidelines on neutralisation that the officials had worked out in Jakarta in December. The next officials meeting, the New Zealand embassy reported, would address the question of great power guarantees. 'Are these needed, and if so in what form? Will they not give the great powers the excuse to meddle in the affairs of the region?'²⁴

Tan Boon Seng of Singapore's MFA, along with the desk officer, Miss V. Menon, attended the follow-up meeting of ASEAN officials on neutralisation, held at Baguio, 19-21 June 1973. The statement they issued referred to the steady progress that had been made towards realising the objectives of the Kuala Lumpur declaration. Instead of seeking guarantees from the outside powers, 'the conference was reported to have agreed ... on letting the big powers recognise and respect the zone'. To do that, one source said, 'we have to be ready with a specific blueprint which we could show these big powers so that it would be also to their own interest to insure the neutrality of the region. Of course we cannot impose on the big powers although we can initiate dialogues with them.'²⁵ In Kuala Lumpur the desk officer, Azzat, said delegates had expressed differing views about the 'guarantees', some wanting them carefully defined, others happy with 'a purely token expression by the super-powers of their recognition and respect of the concept of neutralisation'. The Malaysians were somewhere in between. 'They wanted guarantees to be meaningful but not so firm as to give any of the super-powers the right of intervention'. They were not 'disheartened' by the Baguio meeting. Neutralisation was still being discussed. 'They have never expected anything other than a long haul on neutralisation and the success of the policy may be seen to lie not so much in its eventual fulfilment but in the sense of direction and the cooperation among ASEAN countries which it promotes.'²⁶

Sir J. Johnston suggested in October 1973 that regionalism was 'a present reality', and neutralisation 'a convenient aspiration, of which we must take account not because of its realism, but because of its convenience to its proponents'. ASEAN was no longer, as in 1967, 'a talking shop', but a 'genuine vehicle for consultation and cooperation, with increasing political content, and ... on the way to being institutionalised.' It consulted on neutralisation, the recognition of Bangladesh, relations with China, and over the southern

Philippines ASEAN had priority over Islam. In the economic field members were working more closely together, trying to present a common front to the EEC and in international negotiations.

With enlargement, the discussion moved from 'reality' to 'aspiration', and regionalism began to link up with neutralisation. 'The aspiration is that at some time in the future the association will extend to include the other five SE Asian countries: and that together the Ten will form an area of "peace, freedom and stability", collectively persuading the super powers to remain at a political equidistance which none singly could hope to achieve.' No one in Malaysia thought that enlargement or neutralisation was 'on the discernible horizon'. They might never happen, but they were 'a present convenience', providing 'an immaculate set of foreign policy objectives now, to which neither East nor West can object. ...'

'Faced with prospect of an assortment of SE Asian States, appearing in the aftermath of one or another kind of colonialism, disunited, uncertain and obvious take-over targets - the classic "power vacuum" after British, French and partial US withdrawal - the Malaysians believe that the regional acceptance of the common policy goals they have described as neutralisation will give the region the appearance and possibly a genuine sense of direction and unity of purpose, and strengthen its position vis-a-vis the super powers.' They believed, perhaps rightly, 'that if these aims and objectives are sufficiently reiterated and successfully put across, they may possibly derive from their acceptance as objectives some of the benefits that in theory would flow from their eventual realisation'.²⁷

Resolution of differences

The ASEAN powers moved towards the treaty of friendship, adopted at the long-deferred summit in 1976. Inasmuch as it provided for the resolution of differences among members, it was a step towards the zone of peace, freedom and neutrality: if the region could not resolve its own differences, it would only invite interference from outside. But, though that was in a sense an old-fashioned type of treaty, as the late Michael Leifer argued,²⁸ the ASEAN states were also engaged, as the British High Commissioner saw, in a newer type of diplomacy. Students of International Relations sometimes draw too firm a line between realism and constructivism. This was a realist's constructivism. By talking in a particular way, you were also acting, in a sense bringing about at least part of your stated objectives. Among contemporary officials, Johnston seems to offer the keenest perception of ASEAN diplomacy. New Zealand comments, though not at odds, were rather less sharp. The reference the New Zealand High Commissioner in Singapore made to the 'book by Falk et al' is presumably a reference to *Neutralization in World Politics* by Cyril E. Black, Richard A Falk, Klaus Knorr and Oran Young, published by Princeton University Press in 1968, following on their report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee of 10 October 1966. It includes documents on the neutralisation of Laos in 1961-2 and also the 'draft outline of a model treaty of neutralization'. [pp. 191-5] That was concerned with a single state, and it provided for guarantors. [p. 193] Malaysia had initially sought guarantors in the ZOPFAN discussions. In a sense ASEAN's regionalism was, however, a substitute for them. If neighbours did not fall out, there would be no need to call in outside help. Still more significant, though less obvious, is ZOPFAN's multi-state aspect. In this declaratory and constructionist kind of diplomacy, numbers would count.

The Laos negotiations may again be relevant. At the time Prince Sihanouk - in the event vainly – suggested a neutral belt in Southeast Asia, covering at least his country and neighbouring Laos. The British FO saw advantage in it: 'it enshrined the "Sacred Cow Principle", as Fred Warner, head of the South East Department put it. 'It was easy enough for powers to knock around a little ping-pong ball like Laos but once you had established a neutral belt this became a major feature of the world political scene and it would be considered a great sacrilege to tamper with it.'²⁹ Recognising the principle, the Malaysians were more ready to drop the difficult question of guarantees.

Throughout the story of the early years of ZOPFAN, as of the story of SEAFET, ASA and ASEAN, one is struck, as were contemporaries, by the substantial role played by Malaya/Malaysia. In my book I traced that to its search for post-independence security. The New Zealand documents perhaps suggest that I exaggerated its concern over Indonesia, to which they make little reference. But it seems quite clear that its leaders believed that, if the region wished to avoid great power dominance in the future, its defence must not involve simply accepting the dominance of the largest regional power.

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- ⁷ 'The neutralisation of Southeast Asia', *Pacific Community*, 3,1 (October 1971), pp. 110-17.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 115-16.
- ⁹ Telegram, 18 Nov. 1971, 1019. FCO 24/967[27].
- ¹⁰ Telegram, 25 Nov. 1971, 769. FCO 24/967[32].
- ¹¹ Heiner, pp. 59-60.
- ¹² Memo, HC/Wn, 10 Dec. 1971. PM 343/12/1 Pt 2, National Archives, Wellington.
- ¹³ Telegram ex Singapore, 18 April 1972, 217. *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Memo, H.H. Francis/Wn, 26 April 1972. *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Memo, Chargé/Wn, 18 May 1972. *ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Memorandum, 22 May 1972. *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Memo, N.Haffey/Ottawa, 26. June 1972, 148, *ibid.*, Pt 3.

- ¹⁸ Tarling, Nicholas 2006, *Regionalism in Southeast Asia*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 164-5.
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- ²⁰ Telegram, 20 July 1972, 2169. Ibid.
- ²¹ Report, 27 July 1972. FCO 24/1270 [36].
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- ²³ Telegram, 21 Feb. 1973, 182. Pt 3.
- ²⁴ Telegram, 21 April 1973, 387. PM 343/12/1 Pt 4.
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- ²⁹ Warner/Butler, 12 April 1961, and enclosure. FO 371/159835 [DF 1015/477], National Archives, Kew.