

New cooperation on the Pacific rim

by Linda de Hoyos

“Cooperation among developing countries, or South-South cooperation, will become a strength which could expand North-South cooperation. In return, South-South cooperation . . . will be the main factor toward the emergence of a new world economic order which will bring justice to all races and countries.”

This declaration came Jan. 15 from Indonesian President Suharto, on the occasion of the visit to Jakarta of Bangladesh President Ershad. The statement reflects a new trend in diplomacy in Asia that, as Suharto indicates, could have far-reaching consequences. Although Bangladesh and Indonesia are both predominantly Islamic, Ershad's visit has a far greater significance. It is but one of numerous trips between the nations of South Asia and Southeast Asia, now taking place on a level not seen since the 1950s, when India's Jawaharlal Nehru and other leaders of the developing countries launched the Non-Aligned Movement.

Under the rule of the British Empire, India and those countries adjacent to it, were oriented toward Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Western Europe. However, in the last three years, India has taken steps toward a new “Look East” policy that was highlighted by the 1983 visit of Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone to India during the administration of Indira Gandhi. Even so, only in the last two years has India taken notice of the Southeast Asian countries—despite the lasting cultural influence of Indian traders and colonizers in these regions over many centuries.

The ground was broken when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited Thailand, Indonesia, and New Zealand in November. Subsequent visits to Bangkok by Indian Foreign Minister N.D. Tiwari laid the concrete foundations for the creation of an Indo-Thai Trade Commission which will meet for the first time in April. *EIR* conferences in both Bangkok and New Delhi, bringing together speakers from Thailand and India, have also focused on the mutual benefits of the construction of the Kra Canal in Thailand, a project that was endorsed by India's Minister of State for Science and Technology K.R. Narayanan in 1985.

India is also reforging links with Malaysia, where a full 12% of the population is of Indian origin. On Jan. 30, Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohammad stopped in New Delhi on his return home from the Islamic Summit in

Kuwait. He and Prime Minister Gandhi met for over 1 hour and 45 minutes, without aides. Leading topics on the agenda were trade and the fight against drugs.

The two leaders also reviewed the current strategic position of the developing countries, particularly those in Asia and Africa. This included discussion of the nine-nation AF-RICA Fund of the Non-Aligned Movement, which met for the first time in New Delhi Jan. 24-25; the ongoing conflict in Kampuchea; and South Asia generally.

According to the Indian press, both Mahathir and Gandhi agreed that ties of cooperation must be created between the nations of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, which encompasses India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka) and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations comprising the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Brunei). The two leaders were also “in full agreement that the idea of a South Commission should be supported to give impetus to South-South cooperation.”

To expand this cooperation, Indian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Natwar Singh will be visiting Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. It will be the first-ever visit to Manila by an Indian high official.

The strategic impact

There are two strategic factors propelling the Asean and subcontinent countries to begin to look to each other. First is the deepening economic crisis, particularly among the Asean countries who had enjoyed high growth up to the mid-1980s. Indonesia, for example, has announced that it will meet all its debt service payments, but at the expense of cutting its military budget by a full 51% and a national budget that has brought a halt to development projects. With the protectionism coming from the United States and other “North” countries, the countries of South and Southeast Asia are looking to fill the trade gap with new bilateral ties.

Another factor is that already portended by the U.S. protectionist wall against ASEAN in particular—the overall American strategic withdrawal from the region that was signaled to all by the continuing disaster in the Philippines. U.S. withdrawal removes one point of leverage for all the Pacific rim countries—from Japan through to Pakistan—against the two big giants hovering over the continent, the U.S.S.R. and the People's Republic of China.

These two factors are acting to override the longstanding mutual distrust between the Asean countries and India in particular, where foreign ministries both tended to look at the other side as captured pawns of opposite superpowers. The nascent alliance does not have to be limited to a defensive one. If the links of South-South cooperation are permitted to grow and if Japan adds its industrial might to the enterprise, the Pacific rim would emerge as a strong ally for the United States; a United States, that is, that has divested itself of Kissingerian policies.