

Japan and Southeast Asia reject Haig's China Card

by Richard Katz

Last week a former foreign policy adviser to Ronald Reagan commenting on the proposed arms sales to China warned *EIR* that if Secretary of State Alexander Haig carried his China Card strategy too far, "we'll end up with only one ally in East Asia, i.e. China. The rest will go neutralist." The speaker was University of California Prof. Chalmers Johnson, a top expert on Asia who served on Reagan's Foreign Policy Advisory Board during the 1980 campaign.

The warning (see *EIR*, June 30) was born out by the angry reception Haig received June 19-20 in Manila at the Foreign Ministers Conference hosted by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The reactions included:

- an incredible warning by new Japanese Foreign Minister Sunao Sonoda in private conversations with Haig that the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance was "jeopardized" by Haig and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's heavy-handed pressures on Japan to play a regional military role as an adjunct to the China Card;
- a warning by a high-level Japanese Foreign Ministry "official"—thought by some to be Sonoda himself—that the U.S. arms sales to China "added an element of instability to the Asian region";
- the statement by Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar that the ASEAN nations—which include Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, and Singapore—were "jolted" by Haig's arms sales decision, and Mochtar's comment that "I don't see how it can be helpful";

- the fear expressed by an unidentified ASEAN foreign minister to the *Washington Post* that "Washington was prepared to let China play a bigger role in the region, leading to future Chinese dominance over the whole area";

- the rejection by ASEAN of Haig's proposal of armed support to a Khmer Rouge-led united front and "military pressure" on Vietnam in favor of a proposal for a political solution to the Kampuchean problem through the use of U.N. peacekeeping troops and disarming of the various Kampuchean factions following a negotiated withdrawal of Vietnamese troops.

ASEAN versus the China Card

Alexander Haig walked into the Manila meeting with tough talk and "guns blazing." He declared that "the Soviets or their proxies [Vietnam] remain the greatest threat to international peace," and loudly proclaimed his determination "to challenge active Soviet interventionism wherever it occurs." He proposed increased military aid to ASEAN countries.

Earlier in Peking, Haig's Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs John Holdridge, a former Kissinger aide, had proposed U.S. "military pressure" on Vietnam. However, when the ASEAN nations didn't react well, Haig declared that the proposal was supposed to have been an off-the-record remark.

In reality, according to Washington sources, Haig's ostentatious declamations on the Kampuchean issue—

including proposals for U.S. arms supplies to a Pol Pot-led “united front”—are not prompted by an illusion that the Kampuchean people would rally against the Vietnamese in favor of a regime that murdered 3 million Kampucheans between 1975 and 1978. Rather, Haig was prompted by a memo written in February of this year by two Carter holdovers, then-Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State Michael Armacost and John Negroponte. The memo suggested that U.S. agitation around the Kampuchea issue could be used to both solidify U.S. ties to China and to suppress widespread anti-China feeling among the ASEAN countries.

ASEAN reality is quite different. Indonesia and Malaysia strongly oppose Communist China. This is partly due to the large ethnic Chinese populations in these countries which dominate many businesses and are viewed as an obstacle to industrialization. Typical of the feeling in these countries—whose population totals 165 million people—is an editorial in the Malaysian *New Straits Times* on Haig’s proposed arms sales to China:

ASEAN is understandably very concerned at the escalation of this romance which explicitly identifies Russia to be the principal, if not only, superpower ready to gobble up Southeast Asia as part of its grand design for the whole world. Regrettably, the Chinese threat has been reduced to being a bogey only. But nothing has happened to alter the fact that both the Russians and the Chinese have had their own designs on the freedom and neutrality of Southeast Asia. The Kampuchean issue has placed China closer to ASEAN. But, as [Interior Minister] Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie puts it, that very closeness will turn to peril in about half a decade when the Vietnamese situation has abated. China’s camouflage as an ASEAN benefactor is too thin to hide the historic ambitions Peking has always had in this region.

Another ASEAN diplomat added, “Although the ASEAN countries now see Vietnam as the main threat in the region, in the longer term China could be the main threat.”

Opposite Indonesia and Malaysia is Chinese-populated city-state of Singapore, which supports China on many regional issues. This is why the *New York Times* often chooses to cite Singapore (whose population is only 2.5 million) when it wants a “Third World” quote. Typical of Singapore is an editorial in their *Straits Times* supporting Holdridge’s call for military pressure on Vietnam.

Thailand, due to its geographic position opposite Kampuchea, is more dependent on China, but reportedly chafes at that dependence. The Philippines politically is in the middle of the five.

A year ago the Singapore attitude had greater weight within ASEAN as a whole. However, at the latest ASEAN foreign ministers’ meeting, ASEAN moved closer to the Indonesia-Malaysia view rejecting Haig’s confrontation politics in favor of seriously negotiating settlement with Vietnam over Kampuchea.

The ASEAN communiqué, issued June 18 just before Haig’s arrival as a guest, condemns the Vietnamese troop presence in Kampuchea and declares the current Heng Samrin government illegitimate. It also “welcomes the current consultations among the Kampuchean nationalists [a reference to both the Pol Pot-Khmer Rouge forces and the far smaller proposed “united front” partners Prince Sihanouk and former Prime Minister Son Sann—R.K.] with a view to setting up a coalition government.” However, the communiqué nowhere proposes ASEAN, or U.S. or Chinese, aid to such a “united front.” Indeed, Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi had earlier written letters to several American newspapers denying reports that he supported arms aid to a “united front” as proposed by Haig.

With Son Sann declaring that “the Khmer Rouge would like to murder me in my sleep,” according to the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Haig’s united front is a chimera and plays no role in the ASEAN peace plan. The ASEAN communiqué instead proposes:

- 1) The dispatch of the U.N. peacekeeping forces to Kampuchea;
- 2) The withdrawal of all armed forces from Kampuchea in the shortest time possible under the supervision of U.N. peacekeeping forces;
- 3) The disarming of all Khmer [Kampuchean] factions immediately after the completion of the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Kampuchea.

The third point is aimed at the Khmer Rouge. The communiqué adds, “The establishment of a truly representative Government must remain a matter for the Kampuchean people themselves to decide and pursue.”

Philippines Foreign Minister Carlos Romulo, speaking for ASEAN, dispelled any hint of linkage between this plan and Haig’s by stating that the U.N. force “is there to try and establish a U.N. presence of peace. It will not be there to fight and expel Vietnamese troops.”

The *Bangkok Post* adds that the ministers agreed that:

If Vietnam withdraws its forces from Kampuchea, ASEAN and the Indochina states could work together to prevent intervention of any major powers and meet external threats. To this end they proposed economic and technical assistance to Vietnam and Kampuchea to rebuild their economies after so many years of war.

It hardly sounds like a proposal to join Haig in fighting

what he provocatively calls "Soviet proxies."

Although in public Vietnam condemned the ASEAN meeting, it made counterproposals that indicate the possibility of conciliation. Following a June 15 meeting of the foreign ministers of Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea, the Indochina states communicated to Malaysian representatives that if China guaranteed an end to military and political support to the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam would withdraw its troops from Kampuchea. The Indochina states' communiqué, issued before the ASEAN conference, added: "Right now, if peace and stability on the Kampuchea-Thai border are secured, Vietnam and Kampuchea will reach agreement on the partial withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea."

While neither the Vietnamese nor ASEAN proposals in their present form will be accepted by the other, both sides are gradually shifting positions and engaging in small bilateral meetings. A negotiated settlement is by no means out of the question, since ASEAN is approaching the situation now from the standpoint of eliminating a source of regional tension rather than being a pawn of China Card geopolitics à la Haig.

Eventually ASEAN may tacitly recognize that the Pol Pot forces will never again rule what is left of the population of Kampuchea, and that the Heng Samrin government, or its successors, is there to stay, just as the United States recognized Peking. ASEAN will be satisfied with withdrawal of Vietnamese troops, which the Vietnamese say they will do once Chinese threats to themselves and Kampuchea are ended.

Thus the major factor maintaining the conflict is China's desire to further its own regional ambitions and Haig's support of China in furtherance of Kissinger's China Card strategy. Any U.S. policy that presumes that ASEAN will have indefinite patience with the current situation is doomed to backfire as badly as Haig's arms supplies to China.

Japan's revolt against Haig

On his way to the Manila conference, where he supported the ASEAN view, the tart-tongued new Japanese foreign minister, Sunao Sonoda, told the press that he would demand of Haig whether Washington wanted Japan to be "an obedient faithful partner or a partner worthy of trust and consultations," according to Kyodo news service.

Sonoda's comments were prompted by Haig and Weinberger's pressure on Japan to launch a drastic military buildup and regional military role as an adjunct to the China Card. Even prominent advocates of a stronger Japanese defense role, such as Nomura Research, Inc. President Kiichi Saeki, balk at Haig's measures. Saeki told a Washington conference June 12:

The concept of a United Front strategy involving

Japan, the U.S., Europe, and China to counter the Soviet military threat is perhaps going too far. It is dangerous to corner the Soviet Union, and while cooperation with China is necessary, caution should be exercised so that the U.S.S.R. will not overreact in the fear it is being encircled.

Americans traveling with Saeki on the May 21-23 Trilateral Commission visit to China report that he was strongly opposed to any U.S. arms sale to China. Saeki is no dove, but a strong collaborator with the Atlantic Council in advocating a Japanese defense buildup.

Imagine, then, Japan's shock when, at a Hawaii "working level" U.S.-Japan meeting on defense in June, Pentagon officials told Japan to scrap its current defense plan and prepare to resist invasion for a "prolonged time" without U.S. help, as Kyodo reported. The shock was amplified by Haig's China arms decision.

Sonoda emphatically told the press conference that he rejected the Pentagon proposal. He added that he would "seek an explanation" from Haig of the arms deal for China, and Sonoda's foreign ministry officials termed the deal a source of instability in Asia. Sonoda drove the point home by adding that during his recent tour of Europe, accompanying Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki, he was impressed by European arguments that arms talks were merely a means and détente the goal—a fundamental rejection of Haig's strategy.

Haig had operated on the presumption that with sufficient pressure, Japan would do almost anything. That attitude lost Haig-supporter Foreign Minister Masayoshi Ito his job to Sonoda in May. Further pressure from Haig may boomerang even more sharply.

One indication of Japan's new disentanglement from Haig's China Card came in Sonoda's Manila presentation. Ito had supported the Brzezinski-Haig line on Kampuchea, going so far as to give foreign aid to the Khmer Rouge. Sonoda reversed this. Sonoda supported the ASEAN peace plan, and went even further. He did not mention the "united front" at all in his June 20 speech. Instead, like ASEAN, Sonoda proposed U.N. peacekeeping forces and phased Vietnamese troop withdrawal. The foreign minister then added a proposal for U.N.-supervised elections to form a national assembly and draw up a new constitution. Finally, Sonoda proposed that the major powers guarantee the peace, on the basis of an international fund for the reconstruction of Kampuchea.

Sonoda added that a July U.N. conference on Kampuchea—proposed by ASEAN and boycotted by Vietnam—should "avoid making the conference a forum solely to condemn Vietnam."

America's most important friends in East Asia have clearly rejected Haig's China Card. Washington can either have them as allies and friends or have the China Card; it cannot have both.