

Report from New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

ASEAN security forum excludes India

Concern is growing that the U.S. was trying to draw India out of the picture at the recent ASEAN security forum.

The agreement to set up a forum to discuss political and regional security, which was decided at the recently concluded ministerial meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Singapore, has raised uneasy questions in India. When U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher reiterated that the United States will remain actively engaged in Asia, that it will remain an Asian-Pacific power and abide by treaty obligations, and continue the forward military presence and work with nations in the region to maintain a peaceful and secure Asia, many Indian analysts were left wondering whether the whole security forum concept was scripted in Washington.

The two-day (July 23-24) ministerial meeting of the six ASEAN members (Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines) was followed by the post-ministerial meeting, which was attended by the six ASEAN members, ASEAN's seven major trading partners (United States, Japan, Canada, the European Community, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand), and Russia, China, Vietnam, and Papua New Guinea, where little or no interest in India was shown.

Washington's expressed concern about the security of the region has also made it apparent to Indian authorities in New Delhi that ASEAN will continue to depend heavily on the United States, thus making it difficult for India to play a significant part in its security or become a major participant in ASEAN's economic prosperity.

The Indian uneasiness rests on the fact that New Delhi, particularly since

the late 1980s, was formulating policies to develop a closer bond with ASEAN. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's visit to Indonesia during the Non-Aligned Movement summit last year and a visit to Thailand this spring had raised hopes that India had finally succeeded in convincing ASEAN that India, with its political, economic, and military capabilities, wants to be a partner of ASEAN. Prime Minister Rao had confided that he has standing invitations from each of the six ASEAN countries and he would visit them in the near future.

With the onset of the Cold War, during which ASEAN was allegedly under the threat from the Soviet Union, India was eyed as Moscow's stalking horse. It is moot whether this image of India was ASEAN's self-developed perception or a reflection of the way Washington portrayed India then. India, which had supported Vietnam during the Vietnam War and had been critical of Thailand's stance toward the Vietnam-backed regime in Cambodia, did little to assuage ASEAN's suspicions.

However, the post-Cold War period has seen an effort on both sides to build bridges. India, eager to participate in the "economic miracle" in Southeast Asia and burdened by its own low productivity, was the first to make the overture. India became much more transparent in defense matters, willing to forgo defense relationships with ASEAN countries. India's decision to undergo a series of economic reforms, which included offering high incentives to foreign investors, went over well with ASEAN,

as it did with both Japan and the United States.

At the same time, it was evident that ASEAN remained suspicious. The stated concern about India's growing military and the Indian Navy, in particular, by ASEAN in the early 1990s originated most likely from Australia. However, ASEAN did not balk at reiterating the concern.

Soon after, Canberra, probably under advice of the United States, with which India had carried out a joint naval exercise in 1992, began to appreciate India's efforts to modernize its military. On cue, ASEAN dropped the concerns about India's growing military might.

However, the non-inclusion of India in the security discussions and the full-fledged commitment by the United States toward the Asia-Pacific region's security is a matter of new concern in Delhi. India sees that there are a number of issues which remain unresolved in Asia and any one of them could lead to an ugly military clash. The ham-handed approach of the People's Republic of China in the Spratley and Paracel Islands, and the continuing isolation of Vietnam and Laos, both have the potential to grow into security threats. The belligerent posture of Beijing in the South China Sea, and the United States, ever ready to intervene, could keep the region highly volatile.

At this juncture, New Delhi believes that ASEAN could have kept the more aggressive fighters out of the arena, and then ASEAN as a bloc could begin to deal with territorial, border, and maritime disputes. But, analysts suspect that that cannot be done, because the entire security forum was scripted in Washington, and ASEAN, like Indonesia's famous shadow puppets, is only capable of reflecting what the puppeteers want to do.