

Bush Offers APEC Worse Than Nothing

Despite its name, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the APEC heads of state summit in Los Cabos, Mexico on Oct. 23-26 was preoccupied with terrorism, while President Bush ignored the pleas for serious discussion of the global economic crisis and its impact in Asia.

The two “results” of the APEC forum were a counter-terrorism agreement, and an offer from the United States to allow members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to beg for a free-trade pact, but only if they agree to follow globalization dictates. The “Secure Trade in the APEC Region” (STAR) initiative, introduced by President Bush, is “designed to enhance security while increasing trade,” a White House statement said. “The STAR initiative commits APEC economies to accelerate

action on screening people and cargo for security before transit, increasing security on ships and airplanes while en route, and enhancing security in airports and seaports.” Bush’s efforts to get support for an Iraq war, or stiff demands on North Korea in regard to their nuclear program, were not successful, however.

Bush’s offer to the ten Southeast Asian nations to apply for Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with the United States—called the “Enterprise for ASEAN Initiative”—has the smell of a corpse inviting guests into the coffin. According to the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council, which praised the plan as a “crucial step forward,” the deal allows those countries “that are committed to market liberalization and market-oriented reform” to apply to the U.S. Trade Representative for a bilateral FTA.

Any serious discussion of Asian responses to the global financial-economic collapse will have to wait for the ASEAN+3 heads-of-state meeting (the ASEAN nations plus China, Japan and South Korea) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on Nov. 4-5.

—Michael Billington