

Against Malacca Piracy, S. Thailand Violence: It's Time for the Kra Canal

by Mike Billington

There has been much attention in world capitals and the world press over the past six months on two apparently distinct problems in the region surrounding the Malacca Straits—which divide Indonesia's Sumatra from Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand on the Malay Peninsula.

Severe anti-government violence erupted in the Moslem-majority southern provinces of Thailand in January, a rebellion which has continued to frustrate both military and economic efforts to defuse, while even the source of the violence is poorly identified or understood.

Simultaneously, in the Straits themselves, the high rate of piracy (among the highest in the world) in the strategic waterway—which is the pathway for nearly one-third of world trade and half the world's oil shipments—has provoked concern over potential sea-borne terrorist acts, and discussion of the necessary countermeasures in these overcrowded shipping lanes. Statements by American military officials and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, that the United States is interested in deploying Marines in pursuit of terrorism in the region—and possibly in the Straits themselves, which lie within the sovereign territory of Malaysia and Indonesia—have been met by angry denunciations in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta.

Solution Posed Two Decades Ago

However, the dual crises should come as no surprise, and both could have been avoided. A little more than 20 years ago, in October 1983, *EIR* and the Fusion Energy Foundation, both founded by Lyndon H. LaRouche, held a conference in Bangkok, co-sponsored by Thailand's Ministry of Transportation, which warned about the eventual overcrowding of the Straits of Malacca, and identified an underdevelopment crisis in southern Thailand. Moreover, the Conference proposed a solution: the construction of a sea-level canal across the Isthmus of Kra in southern Thailand. The Kra Canal would relieve the crowding in the Straits, while also transforming southern Thailand into a center for growth and prosperity which would extend across Asia. A second conference on the same theme, also in Bangkok, was held a year later, in October 1984.

Although the shipping distance saved by the construction

of the Kra Canal would not compare with that of the other two great canals, the Suez and the Panama—it would shorten the length of a trip from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea by about 900 miles—it would nonetheless carry as much traffic as either of those, due both to the shorter route, and to the crowding in the Straits. The waterway carried over 50,000 ships per year in 1983, but *EIR* projections at the time indicated, correctly, that economic growth in China and India would double the Straits traffic, necessitating an alternate route via a sea-level canal.

But the concept behind the Kra Canal goes far deeper than simply facilitating shipping time. As LaRouche told the 1983 Bangkok Conference: "The prospect of establishing a sea-level waterway through the Isthmus of Thailand, ought to be seen not only as an important development of basic economic infrastructure both for Thailand and the cooperating nations of the region; this proposed canal should also be seen as a keystone, around which might be constructed a healthy and balanced development of needed basic infrastructure in a more general way."

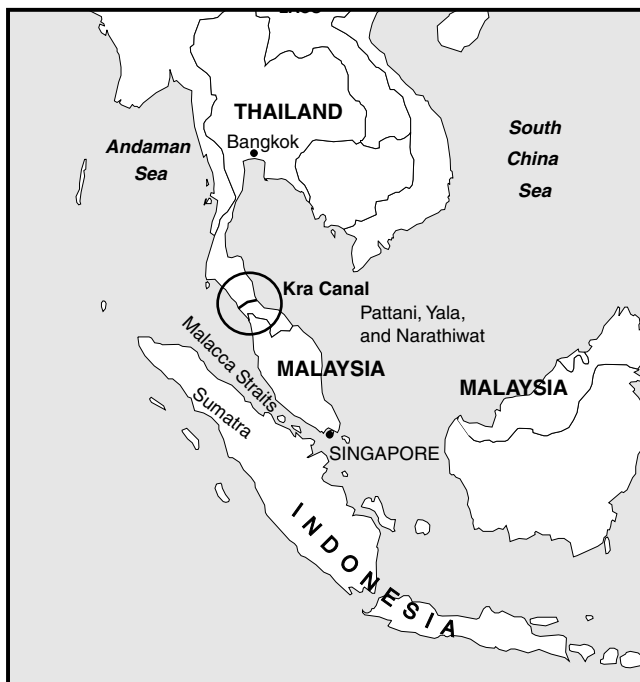
That conference, called "The Development of the Pacific and Indian Ocean Basins," presented the Kra Canal, together with construction of new deep-water ports at either end, and industrial zones in adjacent areas, as the central hub of an Asianwide development approach based on projects including the development of the Mekong River basin, major water control projects in China, and water and power projects in the Ganges-Brahmaputra region of India. This, in turn, was part of a global "Great Projects" approach promoted by LaRouche, and also by the Global Infrastructure Fund (GIF), a body sponsored by the Mitsubishi Research Institute. The intention was to counter the already well-advanced collapse of the world economy into a "post industrial" junk heap and speculative bubble. The failure of the world to act on that policy has brought about the current descent into global war and depression far worse than any in modern history.

Peace Through Development

As to the security in southern Thailand, one can still hear today the argument made 20 years ago—that the Kra Canal

FIGURE 1

The Central Location and Purpose of the Kra Canal

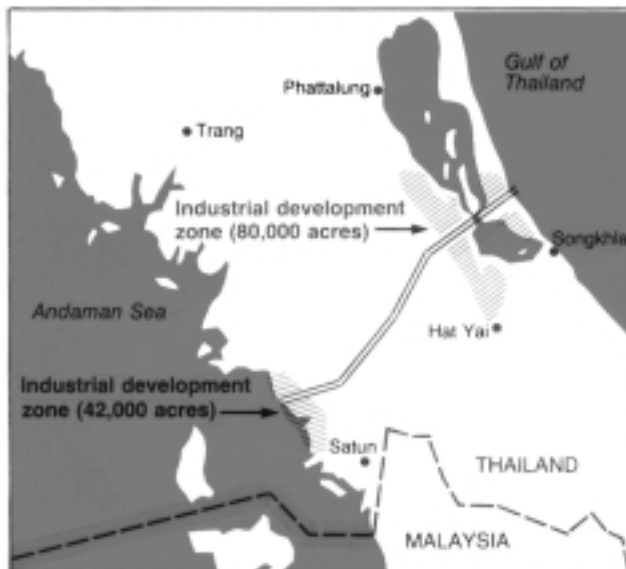


Source: EIRNS.

The Kra Canal, urgently needed for a generation, can be the nation-building project to integrate the three Muslim-majority provinces in the south of Thailand with the nation; and is critically needed to relieve the great congestion in the Malacca Straits, where piracy is leading to international strategic tensions. Inset: the Kra Canal route chosen by the TAMS engineering study of 1973, still a viable framework plan.

would “divide” Thailand, cutting off the heavily Moslem southern provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala, thus encouraging the separatists to break off the region south of this man-made barrier, from the rest of Thailand. This concern exemplifies the fundamental failure of policymakers internationally, especially in the era of “post-industrial society” propaganda from the international financial institutions, to grasp the concept presented by Pope Paul VI in his 1968 encyclical “Populorum Progressio,” that “The new name for peace is development.”

A report on the 1983 Bangkok Conference, published in *Fusion* magazine (July/August 1984) addressed this issue: “A major included strategic factor also deserves the attention of Thai policy makers. Contrary to some reported opinion and concern that a canal through the southern part of the Golden Peninsula would have negative security implications, severing the ethnically and religiously ill-integrated southernmost part of the nation from the rest of the country, the opposite



consequence would be the projected outcome. The canal complex, as a major industrial growth-spot, would function as an integrating and unifying factor, joining together the southern, central, and northern provinces in a large common endeavor capable of inspiring the entire nation, uplifting the economic condition of the southern population, and thus reducing the potential for dissatisfaction and dissension.”

General Saiyud Kerdphol, a former Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces, in addressing the 1984 *EIR* Bangkok Conference, said: “Development and security must go hand in hand as a coordinated effort. We must recognize that economic, political, and social development all contribute to security—but that security, in itself, is not development.”

Also speaking at the Conference was General Harn Lee-nanond, who, as Commander of the southern-based Thai Fourth Army, was known for bringing peace to the South through a process of cooperation with the local population and the promotion of development. He insisted that the Kra Canal was precisely what was needed to unify the population of Thailand.

The Kra Canal was certainly not a new idea at the time of the Conferences in the 1980s. Thai King Rama I in 1793 proposed a canal from Songkhla on the eastern shore, on the Gulf of Thailand, to the Indian Ocean on the western shore, just above the Malacca Straits. The concept was taken up in the 1950s, and again in the 1970s, but a combination of instability internally and in the region, due to the colonial warfare in Indochina, prevented any significant regional co-operation.

However, a feasibility study, commissioned by K.Y. Chow of the Thai Oil Refining Company, was completed in 1973 by the American engineering firms TAMS (Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton), and Robert R. Nathan Associ-



Gen. Saiyud Kerdphol, former Supreme Commander of the Thai Armed Forces, addressing the 1984 EIR Bangkok Conference. He is flanked by (left to right) Pakdee Tanapura of Thailand; Dr. Zainuddin Bahari of Malaysia's Institute for Strategic and Economic Studies; Dr. Norio Yamamoto of Japan; former Thai secretary general of the Office of Atomic Energy for Peace, Dr. Svasti Srisukh; former Indian Ambassador to Thailand K.L. Dalal; and Dr. H. Roeslan Abdulgam, advisor to Indonesian President Suharto.

ates, in collaboration with the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. This study was discussed in detail at the 1983 EIR Bangkok Conference; it still stands as a solid basis for current studies (see map).

Leading representatives of all the Southeast Asian nations—with the exception of Singapore—were in attendance at one or both of the two Bangkok Conferences of 1983 and 1984. Representatives of TAMS and Lawrence Livermore travelled to Thailand to speak, and leading political and business figures from Japan and India participated. Thai Minister of Communications Samak Sundaravej opened the Conference, saying that “If the Kra Canal is possible, then we should dedicate it to the world.” A financial plan was presented by the Vice President and chief economist at the Bangkok Bank, Dr. Nimit Nontapunthawat.

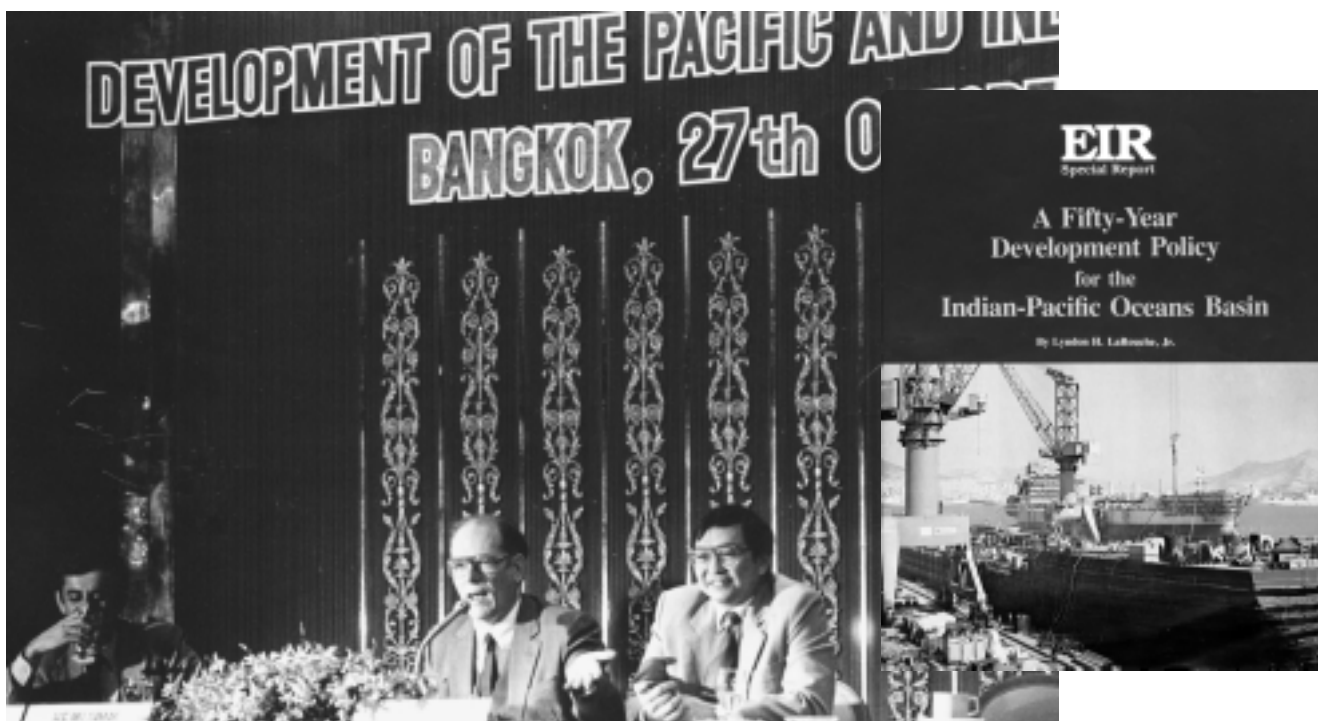
The extraordinary international response and participation in this process was brought about, to a great extent, by the personal initiative of Lyndon LaRouche. LaRouche had authored “A Fifty-Year Development Policy for the Indian-Pacific Oceans Basin” in 1983, which circulated widely across the area, while he also toured Japan, India, and Southeast Asia. His speech at the conference is seen as prescient in retrospect. One example: “The governments of the presently industrialized nations must recognize the fact, that unless the international climate is reshaped in such a way that governments of [the African and Asian] nations have access to adequate practical means for delivering the benefits of technological progress to their rural populations, the unavoidable growth of population and growth of material desires within that population creates the objective preconditions for desta-

bilizing social ferment, and frustrates most of the efforts of governments committed to development. Either such governments are committed to those kinds of changes in the present international monetary order, or those governments should not delude themselves that they are promoting economic development of developing nations generally.”

Peaceful Nuclear Explosives

A key aspect of the discussion at the conferences was the potential advantages of the use of peaceful nuclear explosives (PNE) to carry out the excavations on the most difficult terrain. Today, the use of PNE are completely left out of all discussions of the Kra Canal, due to the hysteria created by the enemies of development against anything nuclear, and the U.S.-centered attack on nuclear energy under the false guise of “anti-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.” This particular form of anti-scientific brainwashing was not as extensive in 1983, and the discussion demonstrated the enormous advantages for Thailand and the world in using this safe, controlled form of nuclear explosive.

With PNE, both the construction time and the cost of building the canal would be nearly cut in half. In addition, the assembly of the required advanced nuclear engineering and scientific manpower would facilitate the development of nuclear-related industries, as well as nuclear energy plants. A spokesman from Lawrence Livermore suggested that a major nuclear isotope separation plant could be constructed as part of the Kra Canal Complex. One of the speakers at the Conference was Dr. Savasti Srisuk, the former Secretary General of the Thai Office of Atomic Energy for Peace—



EIR Founding Editor Lyndon LaRouche speaking to the 1984 Bangkok conference; it was a critical aspect of a global “Great Projects” approach promoted by LaRouche, and also by the Global Infrastructure Fund (GIF), a body sponsored by the Mitsubishi Research Institute. Inset: LaRouche’s internationally-circulated “Pacific Rim development” study published in August 1983.

one of the institutions still remaining from the Eisenhower and Kennedy eras, when the United States promoted Atoms for Peace.

The paradigm shift into a consumerist, post-industrial society was not successfully reversed in the 1980s, however. While some industrial progress was made across Asia in the 1980s and early 1990s, the speculative “globalization” bubble of the 1990s drew Asia in—with hot money and process industries substituting for basic infrastructure development—until the speculators pulled the plug in the 1997-98 crash. The collapse of the Thai economy, under the barrage of the hedge funds and International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditionalities, at least served to inspire some proponents of the Kra Canal, including former Prime Minister (and current Deputy Prime Minister) General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, to renew their efforts to build the Canal.

Cooperation with the now rapidly expanding Chinese economy also opened a new light on the project, as China views infrastructure investment in any nation in the region as mutually beneficial over the long term (as the United States once did, long ago), rather than restricting investments to projects which promise immediate short-term profit to private investors, as is the dominant G-7 policy today. Japanese, Malaysians, Koreans, and some Singaporeans are also getting involved in efforts to move the project forward, according to

Thai sources who are involved.

Pakdee Tanapura, who also spoke at the 1983 and 1984 Bangkok Conferences, is now Chairman of the Subcommittee on International Affairs of the National Committee on the Kra Canal Project Feasibility Study, headed by Deputy Prime Minister General Chavalit. Despite General Chavalit’s enthusiastic support, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has not offered his backing. According to some sources, Thaksin’s business interests in Singapore’s telecommunication industry have outweighed the necessity of the project, due to Singapore’s opposition to it. Perhaps the dangerous situation in the South will convince the Prime Minister otherwise.

The hypocrisy of current American policies in Asia is also placed in sharp relief. While the United States places huge demands on Southeast Asia to follow U.S. policies in the war on terror—including the demand for U.S. basing rights across the region—Washington has entirely eliminated any government support for infrastructure investment, and insists on guaranteed profitability conditions for private U.S. investors in the region—conditions not unlike the infamous colonial “unequal treaties” of the 19th Century. If the United States were seriously committed to remove the conditions which foster terrorism, it would dedicate itself to building the Kra Canal and other Great Projects in Asia and around the world.