CHAPTER VI
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THAILAND AND REGIONAL CO-OOPERATION

In the period since the Second World War Thailand has emerged as an advocate of regional co-operation. As early as 1 July 1947, the then Thai Prime Minister, Thamrong Nawasawat, announced that Thailand and France would jointly sponsor a Pan Southeast Asian Union, with Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam as members, to promote joint development of irrigation, communications, and other such facilities in the area. The opposition parties, however, criticized the idea, and said that Thailand would be a tool in the hands of France if it joined the proposed association. In any case the idea fell through.

Later, however, Bangkok became the headquarters of a number of regional organizations, and the regional headquarters of a number of international organizations, such as the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the Southeast Asia Treaty

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Organization (SEATO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and Alliance internationale de tourisme (AIT). Besides, Thailand became a member of the Colombo Plan, the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), the Asian and Pacific Council (ASPAC), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This chapter is concerned with the role of Thailand only in the ECAFE, the Colombo Plan, the SEATO, the ASA, the ASPAC, and the ASEAN.

Thailand and the ECAFE

The ECAFE is the regional arm of the United Nations in Southeast Asia. At present it has its headquarters in Bangkok. When it was established in 1947, it had its headquarters at Shanghai. In January 1949, the ECAFE Secretariat moved from its original location to Bangkok. The ECAFE holds international meetings throughout the year on such topics as the development of industry and natural resources, trade promotion, economic research and planning, inland transport, flood control, and agricultural progress. Initially Australia, Canada, Taiwan, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands,


New Zealand, Pakistan, Persia, the Philippines, and the United States were its members. The ECAFE has rendered the Government of Thailand advisory services on such questions as railways, bridges, inland waterways, irrigation projects, and population statistics.\(^5\)

The ECAFE has executed two important regional projects—the Asian Highway and the Mekong Development Project. The Asian Highway is designed to link different parts of Asia by strengthening two major routes: (a) from Iran to Indonesia and (b) from Turkey to South Vietnam. A section of the latter route passes through Thailand. On the other hand the Mekong Development Project is designed to exploit the potentials of the great river and some of its tributaries and is concerned with irrigation, navigation, flood control, and hydroelectric power.\(^6\)

The Mekong River flows for 2,600 miles from its source in the snow-covered mountain-ranges of the plateau of Tibet through China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. In 1956 Cambodia, Laos, South Vietnam and Thailand requested the International Co-operation Administration to conduct a reconnaissance survey of the Mekong River to explore the possibilities of both immediate and long-range development, to bring together all basic

\(^5\) Ibid.

information needed for the drawing up of plans for the development of the potentials of the river, to identify areas worthy of further investigation from the developmental point of view, and to establish guidelines for such investigation.7 The survey was to pay special attention to the problems of navigation, flood control, and irrigation and to possible improvements in river-port and portage facilities. Besides, it was to consider long-range plans for the generation of hydroelectric power from the mainstream of the Mekong River or its tributaries, for the irrigation of the Northeast Thailand plateau with the waters of the Mae Nam Mun River (a tributary of the Mekong), and for the expansion of the irrigation facilities in the lower reaches of the river.8

The International Co-operation Administration agreed to the request. It announced on 26 November 1956 that it would pay $50,000 for the project and that the Bureau of Reclamation of the US Department of Interior would undertake the survey. Cambodia, Laos, South Vietnam, and Thailand, agreed to pay local currency costs and provide other assistance for the survey.9

The ECAFE has also sponsored a committee called the Mekong Committee to develop water resources of the Lower

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Mekong Basin with a view to encouraging industrialization in the area. It co-ordinates the planning and development of the various Mekong projects. Project activities are implemented through the co-operative efforts and financing of the four riparian countries—Cambodia, Laos, South Vietnam, and Thailand.¹⁰

The ECAFE established the Asian Development Bank in March 1965 to promote the economic development of the region.¹¹ The Consultative Committee of the Bank consist of the representatives of Ceylon, India, Iran, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Vietnam, and Thailand.

The ECAFE decided to establish an Asian Institute for Economic Development in Bangkok in 1962 with a view to imparting practical and theoretical training in economic and social planning to Government officials. Holyoake, Premier of New Zealand said on 8 January 1963 that a sum of £10,000 from out of the Colombo Plan funds would be contributed to this project.¹²

The four riparian countries contributed between 1957 and 1960 the equivalent of $1,284,000 for the implementation of the Mekong River Development Project. Eleven

¹⁰ Smith, et al., n. 4, p. 531.
¹¹ Ibid.
other countries, together with some regional organizations then participating in the venture advanced $7,094,350 by March 1961. The resources made available for the project amounted to $21,000,000 by March 1962. 13

Thailand and the Colombo Plan

The Colombo Plan was born at a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the countries of the British Commonwealth held in Colombo in 1950. It is now a co-operative effort by the countries of South and Southeast Asia to develop their economies and raise the living standards of their people—an effort underwritten by member countries outside the region. Every member country has the responsibility of formulating and executing its national development programme, and these programmes are discussed by all members at each annual meeting of the organization. 14 Member nations of the Colombo Plan are: Afghanistan, Australia, Bhutan, Burma, Cambodia, Canada, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos, Malaysia, the Maldives Islands, Nepal, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Vietnam, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Among them Australia, Canada, India, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand,

13 Ibid.

and the United Kingdom are the countries which have made sizable assistance available to Thailand.

Thailand became a member of the Colombo Plan on 4 October 1954. It has received benefits in the form of technical assistance and training facilities. Every year it receives 250 scholarships for Thai students, 30 experts, and equipment worth approximately $500,000.15

Since 1962 the Colombo Plan has played a truly significant role in the economic development of Thailand. This role started with the establishment of a road-building equipment centre in Khone Kaen by Australia to construct feeder roads in the northeast. Australian assistance to this centre amounted to $3.5 million. In 1966 Australia established a similar centre ($5 million) at Tak to construct the Tak-Mae Sod Highway (a part of the Asian Highway Project). New Zealand assisted in the establishment of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Khone Kaen. It spent about $360,000 on this enterprise. It also provided equipment worth $1 million for a joint Thai-New Zealand Road-Building Equipment Centre at Mahasarakham for the construction of the Borebua-Buriram Highway. Canada participated in the establishment of the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Khone Kaen and in the survey for, and design of, the Dhonburi-Pak Tho Highway. Japan provided assistance

in the construction of the road from Songkhla to Natawe in the south with equipment and services of experts worth $1 million. Besides, it donated two mobile medical units for the northeast. The United Kingdom assisted in the development of the Faculty of Engineering, Chulalongkorn University, at a cost of $500,000. It is also expected to help in the establishment of a cotton-farm development centre at Tak Fah, Nakorn Sawan.

There is good reason to believe that Colombo Plan assistance would increase in the future. The nature of Thailand's participation, too, has gradually changed: from being a predominantly recipient member, Thailand is fast becoming a donor member. For example, it is now extending technical assistance in the form of training awards to Laos, Pakistan, and South Korea.  

Thailand and the SEATO

The SEATO was founded in September 1954 to deal with the Communist menace in the region of Southeast Asia. It consisted of Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Bangkok became the headquarters of the SEATO.

16 Ibid.  
17 Ibid.
As a founder-member of the SEATO, Thailand received an enormous amount of military and economic aid from the United States and other member nations. We have already discussed the subject at length in an earlier chapter.

Thailand and the ASA

The history of the ASA goes back to the joint communique published at the end of a visit by Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman of Malaya to the Philippines in January 1959; for it is in this communique that one finds the first ever mention of a plan to set up an organization—the Southeast Asia Friendship and Economic Treaty (SEAFET)—to promote economic, technological, and cultural co-operation in Southeast Asia. About two years later, in February 1961, the President of the Philippines, Carlos Garcia, and the Thai Foreign Minister, Thanat Khoman, visited Kuala Lumpur for talks on the formation of a Southeast Asian Union.


It was later announced that Malaya, the Philippines, and Thailand had decided to set up working committees of experts to lay the foundation of an Association of Southeast Asian States. The joint communique published on 13 February 1961 said:

Thailand, Malaya and the Philippines had re-affirmed that the aim of the proposed association of Southeast Asian States was close cooperation which would be non-political in character, independent in every way of any power blocs and essentially one of joint endeavour for the common good of the region in economic and cultural fields.

In July 1961 the Prime Minister of Malaya, Tengku Abdul Rahman, and the Secretary for Foreign Affairs of the Philippines, Felixberto M. Serrano, went to Bangkok for further talks on the subject. On 31 July 1961, the Foreign Ministers of the three countries announced the establishment of an Association for Economic and Cultural Co-operation known as the Association of Southeast Asian States. They issued a document called the Bangkok Declaration, which stated the aims and purposes of the ASA, namely:

(i) to establish effective machinery for friendly consultations, collaborations, and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, and scientific fields;

(ii) to provide educational, professional, technical, and administrative training and research facilities in their respective countries for nationals and officials of the associated countries;

(iii) to exchange information on matters of common interest or concern, in the economic, cultural, educational, and scientific fields;

(iv) to co-operate in the promotion of Southeast Asian studies;

(v) to provide machinery for fruitful collaboration in the utilization of their respective natural resources, in agricultural and industrial development, in expansion of trade and means of transport, in communications improvement, and generally in the task of raising the living standards of their peoples;

(vi) to co-operate in the study of the problems of international commodity trade; and

(vii) to consult and co-operate with one another so as to achieve the aims and purposes of the Association as well as to contribute more effectively to the work of existing international organizations and agencies.21

During the second Ministerial meeting of the ASA in Kuala Lumpur held from 3 to 6 April 1962, a six-point

programme was implemented:

(a) a multilateral trade and navigation agreement among the three countries;

(b) abolition of visas for officials and waiving of visa fees for nationals visiting each other's country in order to facilitate and encourage the flow of nationals among member countries;

(c) joint action in promoting tourism in the ASA area, including the sharing of accommodation and facilities in the tourist promotion offices in their respective countries as well as abroad;

(d) reduced rates for Press telegrams among the ASA countries;

(e) inauguration of an inter-capital railway from Bangkok to Kuala Lumpur, to be known as the ASA Express; and

(f) extension of radio-wave telecommunication between Haadyai in Southern Thailand to Kuala Lumpur.

In addition, an ASA fund of $3 million was to be set up. 22

The ASA virtually broke down in September 1963, when the Philippines refused to recognize the newly created Federation of Malaysia.

Thailand and the ASPAC

In June 1966 nine non-Communist Asian and Pacific nations—viz. Australia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, South Vietnam, Taiwan, and Thailand—met in Seoul and formed a regional association called the Asian and Pacific Council (ASPAC) to promote economic and cultural co-operation among themselves. The ASPAC countries offered a market of some 260 million people, all interconnected by major sea, air and telecommunication routes.

At the invitation of Thailand, the second Ministerial conference of the ASPAC was held in Bangkok in July 1967. At the end of the Conference a fourteen-point communiqué was issued, setting forth the principles underlying the ASPAC, condemning nuclear tests in the region, and expressing sympathy for South Vietnam. The communiqué also declared that the ASPAC was not directed against any nation or group of nations.

The five principles and objectives of the ASPAC were formulated as follows:

(1) to preserve national integrity and independence against threat of any kind;

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24 Ibid.
(ii) to uphold and strengthen the institutions of free society in forms best suited to the needs and circumstances of their people;

(iii) to accelerate regional economic and material growth in the spirit of equal partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous community of Asian and Pacific nations;

(iv) to widen and deepen mutual understanding and appreciation of the cultural heritages and civilizations of the nations in the region without discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, or creed; and

(v) to maintain close and beneficial co-operation with other nations and organizations pursuing similar objectives. 25

The fifth Ministerial conference of the ASPAC was held in Wellington from 17 to 19 June 1970. It discussed a wide range of international issues in general and the current situation in the region in particular. At this meeting, it was decided to establish the ASPAC Secretariat in Bangkok to co-ordinate economic development, as well as trade and investment activity, in the ASPAC region. It was also decided to form an informal group for consultation during the General Assembly debates in the United Nations. 26

25 Ibid., p. 169.

At this meeting the Thai delegate, Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman, said:

The policy of Thailand towards ASPAC was based on an objective and realistic assessment of the situation prevailing in the region. Since the end of the colonial era in the region, there had been an urgent need for the nations within the region to join together in cooperative endeavours to ensure the well-being and advancement of their peoples and to bring about a condition of peace and stability in the region. That was why Thailand had taken an active part in establishing ASPAC and had consistently supported its aims and activities. It was pleased to witness the growth of closer co-operation and better understanding about the people of the ASPAC region. 27

New Zealand advocated a friendly approach towards the People's Republic of China. It especially warned South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand against adopting too rigid a stand on the question of according diplomatic recognition to China. 28

In a joint communique published on 19 June 1970, the Ministers expressed their pleasure at the steady growth of trade between the ASPAC countries and stressed the importance of co-operation in promoting intra-regional trade. They examined the various types of restrictions to trade within the area and looked forward to the elimination as soon as practicable of the range of barriers which still

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27 Ibid.

28 "ASPAC, Keeping Their Cool", n. 26, p. 8.
They noted with gratification that the Government of Thailand had undertaken, on behalf of the ASPAC, to meet the costs of the establishment, administration, and operation of the Economic Co-operation Centre in Bangkok—set up with a view to promoting closer and more harmonious economic relations among member countries and accelerating economic development—for the first three years after its establishment, except for expenses directly related to exports voluntarily provided by the participating Governments. They also noted that the Thai Government would welcome additional contributions by other members of the ASPAC to the activity of the Economic Administrative Centre.

The sixth ASPAC Ministerial Conference held in Manila from 14 to 16 July 1971 occupied itself with the China issue throughout its deliberations: Opening the conference, President Ferdinand Marcos said:

A rapprochement between the United States and the People's Republic of China would have a definite effect on the political climate of Asia. It would reduce fear of nuclear hostilities and create climate in which nations could initiate practical steps forward, free from the menacing shadow of regional-wide nuclear conflict.

30 Ibid.
On the other hand, the Thai Foreign Minister, Thanat Khoman, said that his country would like to establish normal relations with China on a long-range basis, but that, for quite some time, because of domestic circumstances, Thailand would not recognize China regardless of any decision, that the United Nations might take in the matter in the following September. He added that his country would nevertheless explore whatever possibilities there might be "to relax tension between the United States and China".

Thailand and the ASEAN

By August 1966, with the re-establishment of cordiality in the relations between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, a plan was mooted to reactivate and expand the ASA to include Indonesia and Singapore in the interest of greater regional co-operation. To that end, the representatives of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand met in Bangkok in August 1967 and decided to establish what was later christened the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). On 8 August 1967 they collectively issued a declaration which stressed their common problems and common interests and the need to promote regional co-operation on the basis of equality and in a

32 Ibid.
spirit of true partnership, in the interest of peace, progress, and prosperity. The declaration also underlined the temporary nature of all foreign bases in the region, and said that they would not allow them "to be used directly or indirectly to subvert the national independence and freedom of the nations in the area or prejudice the processes of their development". 33

The aims and purposes of the ASEAN were strikingly similar to that of the ASA. The only difference lay in the clause dealing with the nature of foreign military bases, their role and future. Then there was the special emphasis on the point that foreign military bases were not intended "to be used directly and indirectly to subvert the national independence and freedom of states in the area or prejudice the orderly process of their national development". 34

S. Rajaratnam says that considering its potentials, the Southeast Asian region as a whole is full of promise, especially in the matter of trade. The ASEAN countries have a land area twice the size of the European Common Market. The size of their population is some 6 per cent larger than that of the countries forming part of the European Economic Community, and only some 4 per cent


34 Bangkok Post, 9 August 1967.
less than that of the United States. The total gross domestic product of the ASEAN area is about one quarter of the total gross domestic product of the European Economic Community. The total trade of the ASEAN area is about two-fifths of the total trade of the European Economic Community.

No less important is the fact that the ASEAN countries guard the gateway to the Indian Ocean and its vast trade potentials. Since world trade follows sea routes, the ASEAN has great potentials for trade. This thesis is manifestly valid in the case of Singapore, which, because of its strategic location, is well on the way to moving up from the fourth to the third place among all seaports in the world in terms of tonnage cleared.

Thailand played a very active role in establishing the ASEAN. It was for this reason that China and the Soviet Union criticized the ASEAN. A Pravda commentator said:

It is not purely economic considerations which have led to the formation of the ASEAN. While the United States is ostensibly keeping aloof from the association, the leading role in it is played by Thailand and the Philippines, who have organized the Bangkok conference formally to set up the organization. There is hardly any doubt that in the new association they will


36 Ibid.
pursue the line that suits Washington. The ASEAN is like a Trojan horse which wants to draw in other states by talking peace and economic co-operation and culture but really it is an attempt to reanimate the dead organization of SEATO, which was thoroughly discredited by other means. 37

On the other hand Izvestia made the point that the American objective in encouraging the new association was to draw the countries of Southeast Asia into the war in Vietnam. 38

Peking's reaction to the formation of the ASEAN was equally forthright in its hostility. On 9 August 1967, the New China News Agency denounced the ASEAN as a new anti-Chinese, anti-Communist alliance hatched by American imperialism and the "Soviet revisionist ruling clique". 39

Co-operation among the ASEAN countries embraces such varied fields as industry and commerce, tourism, finance, food production and supply (including fisheries), shipping, communication, air-traffic services, meteorology, transportation, telecommunication, civil air transportation, mass media, socio-cultural activities and science and technology. ASEAN activities in each country are financed from

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
out of its current annual budget. In 1969 a joint fund, known as the ASEAN Fund, was established. Administering of ASEAN funds is the responsibility of a permanent committee on finance. 40

The ASEAN has considerable achievements to its credit in political and economic matters. In the sphere of industry and commerce, a Djakarta Fair was organized in 1971 to promote intra-regional trade. In the field of tourism, member countries have provided seven-day visas free to ASEAN nationals and recognition of collective travel documents for package tours. Participation of the private sector in ASEAN activities is evident in the establishment of an ASEAN Tours and Travel Association (ATTA) in Djakarta on 27 March 1971. In the field of transport and telecommunication, the ASEAN countries are covering the existing gaps and forging the necessary new links with a view to establishing a comprehensive system for the whole region.

The Permanent Committee on Civil Air Transportation has taken several steps towards standardization of air fares, aircraft equipment, spare parts, and maintenance. The ASEAN countries have introduced ferry services between Medan and Penang, established a VHV link between Kuala Lumpur and Medan, and provided for training facilities in Djakarta in

40 "ASEAN Today and Tomorrow", n. 33.
diesel-engine and railway operation and training facilities for technicians at the communication centre in Kuala Lumpur. 41

In the field of civil aviation the ASEAN countries are yet to find a basis for co-operation. However, in March 1971 a Multilateral Agreement on Commercial Rights of Non-Scheduled Air Traffic Service among the ASEAN countries was formally signed in Manila. 42 In the sphere of cultural development an agreement was signed in Kuala Lumpur in 1969, providing for ASEAN scholarships to university students for technical training. 43 In regard to mass media among the ASEAN countries, the first meeting of the ASEAN Permanent Committee on Mass Media was held in Kuala Lumpur from 26 to 28 October 1970. A joint communique issued at the end of the meeting said that it reviewed co-operative efforts in mass media among the member countries, and noted that "several projects such as exchange of television and radio-programmes, exchange of publications, television film scripts and personnel, holding of film festivals, exchange of artists, and convening of mass communication seminars had been initiated". 44 The meeting also decided

41 Ibid., and Tun Ismail (Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia), "ASEAN: Some Measures of Success", Asia Pacific Record, vol. 2, no. 1, April 1971, pp. 7-9.

42 See Tarzie Vittachi, "ASEAN at the Cross-roads", The Asian (Hong Kong, 1971).

43 Ibid.

44 Straits Times (Singapore), 29 October 1970.
on the following programmes and activities:

(1) A monthly series of ASEAN radio programmes will be started in 1971.

(2) An ASEAN theme music competition at both national and ASEAN regional levels would be carried out and completed before the end of July 1971.

(3) The Philippines would organize the first ASEAN film festival in Manila in mid July 1971.

(4) The Philippines would host the first seminar on mass communication before or after the film festival.

(5) The Philippines would produce and publish a publication named The ASEAN with effect from December 1971. 45

In addition to these various achievements, the ASEAN symbolizes the sense of unity among the five Southeast Asian nations. The developed nations of the world cannot ignore them any more. There is a feeling that in economic matters, Southeast Asia was accorded much less attention than Africa and Latin America in the sixties and that consequently the countries of Southeast Asia received much less international aid than Africa and Latin America. According to Foreign Minister Adam Malik:

In 1965 the nations in Africa received US $6.20 per capita, nations in Latin America got US $4.20 per capita, nations in Asia received US $3.20 per capita but the nations in Southeast Asia (excluding Vietnam) got only

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45 Ibid.
US $1.60 per capita. This showed the lack of world interest towards Asia. On the other hand it may be caused by lack of unity of action on the part of Asia herself in attracting world attention. The regional co-operation in the framework of ASEAN will undoubtedly strengthen our position, so that our voice and interest will be given more attention by the developed countries. 46

In the same vein, the Foreign Minister of Singapore, S. Rajaratnam, states:

Regional organization like ASEAN are attempts by developing countries to improve their bargaining position through collective strength. But a combination of economically weak and underdeveloped nations does not add up to strength; nor does it make for effective regional co-operation. This is not to dismiss regional associations like ASEAN as exercises in futility. The regional co-operation is the most economic and efficient way for underdeveloped countries to promote rapid economic growth. It is also necessary for economically weaker countries for strengthening their bargaining position against richer nations. 47

According to R.W. Bradford,

ASEAN offers a hope for the future prosperity of the region. It has the support of more than half of the indigenous countries of Southeast Asia. It represents an initial attempt by the indigenous nations to combine

46 See text of Adam Malik's lecture at the second ASEAN Ministerial meeting at Djakarta on 7 August 1968. Available with the Information Service, Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Thailand.

47 Rajaratnam, n. 35, p. 8.
in a purely Asian endeavour without the participation, and thereby the direction, of non-Asian powers. The conception has a great attraction for the Asian states as it appeals to nationalist yearnings of their educated elites to exercise an independent voice in world affairs. 48

The effectiveness of even the SEATO was being questioned in the sixties. So much so that Britain, France, and Pakistan had stopped participating in its military activities. In an interview published in the Bangkok Post on 8 May 1969, Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman rightly pointed out:

SEATO should change its emphasis from a military to a political role if it was to be saved from impotence. The SEATO has no military structure, only a military framework. It has no combined forces like NATO. There has been no instance of collective defence action. There has been individual action by individual members only. The military capacity of SEATO is a fiction. 49

Later, on 30 June 1970, Thanat Khoman said that a thousand elephants could not get the SEATO to move. 50 This view was endorsed by the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Major General Sanga Kittikachorn, who said on


49 Bangkok Post, 8 May 1969.

50 Ibid., 1 July 1970.
2 July 1970 that the SEATO was really a paper tiger. Since its birth in Manila, it had been a failure. He, therefore, felt that member nations should realize their responsibilities towards the region and start making concrete efforts in other ways to solve the problems of the region. 51

Membership of other regional organizations such as the ECAFE, the Colombo Plan, and the ASPAC is open to countries which are situated outside the Southeast Asian region. The ASEAN alone has only Southeast Asian countries as its members. If, therefore, this organization is further strengthened, it may offer an Asian solution to Asian problems.