

Weinberger's visit to Southeast Asia: an anti-Soviet mission that failed

by Ramtanu Maitra

The Reagan administration has shown a renewed interest in Southeast Asia, following a decade of American kowtowing to Peking. Yet Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's recently concluded seven-day trip through Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Australia, and New Zealand failed to reassure some of the ASEAN nations that the United States is earnestly seeking to stabilize the region. Weinberger during his trip, as all available reports indicate, put up a strong rhetorical front against the Soviet Union, but avoided the issue of Chinese threat of expansion in the area, a threat which most of the Southeast Asian nations consider their gravest concern.

In the past two months, two of the United States' friends in the region, President Marcos of the Philippines and President Suharto of Indonesia, met with President Reagan in Washington. Both made it clear that they would welcome efforts to increase the U.S. military capability in the Pacific. The Philippines is a signatory of the 1954 Manila Pact, which provides for automatic U.S. involvement in case of armed aggression by any communist nation against the pact members; President Marcos was assured by the State Department that the United States will stand by its commitments. Weinberger brought up the U.S. commitment to the Manila Pact countries in the context of a general Soviet threat and a specific hypothetical armed aggression by Vietnam against Thailand.

Yet most of the leaders in Southeast Asia are preoccupied with containing Peking. Given the recent cooling-off of U.S.-China relations, the ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) members, Indonesia and Malaysia, in particular, are looking for a much more constructive approach from the United States.

Recently, President Suharto, who severed Indonesia's diplomatic relations with China in 1967 and has shown no sign of reviving ties, stated that Washington's strategic and economic links with Peking might make it easier for China to spend its resources subverting the region's elected governments. Another ASEAN official told the press, while Weinberger was in Singapore: "On the Kampuchean issue, the

question is whether the United States will support us [ASEAN] or China."

The Defense Secretary was clearly pushing for support for the Chinese approach to Cambodia. In Thailand, which is considered by Peking and Washington a "front-line state" against Vietnam, Weinberger pledged \$12.2 million in military aid to Bangkok, which would bring the total U.S. military aid to Thailand in this final year to \$80 million.

Although Weinberger was elusive as to whether the United States will supply arms to the newly formed coalition group of Sihanouk, Son Sann, and Pol Pot—which is dominated militarily by Pol Pot's monstrous Khmer Rouge—against the Heng Samrin regime in Cambodia, it is widely known that both China and Thailand are the main arms conduits to the Khmer rebels.

Weinberger's emphasis on Vietnam as the major source of threat in the region was out of step with the region in light of the fact that Vietnam's Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach left Indonesia three days before Weinberger arrived in Jakarta after long talks with President Suharto and Foreign Minister Mochtar. Thach's talks hinged on finding a peaceful solution for Cambodia and on expanding Vietnam's economic cooperation with the ASEAN nations, Indonesia in particular. Following these meetings, Thach extended an invitation to Mochtar to hold the next round of talks at Hanoi, which the Indonesian Foreign Minister accepted.

Diplomatically, perhaps, Weinberger's chief blunder was in holding a three-hour closed door meeting with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Yuan Kew. Liked by few and trusted by even fewer ASEAN leaders, Lee Yuan Kew is closer to China than any other leader in the region. Last July while he was visting Washington, he asked the U.S. Secretary of State to station an aircraft carrier in the region. What rankled most other ASEAN leaders was that Lee had never bothered to raise the matter with his regional counterparts before proposing it to the United States. In Singapore, where Lee gave him profuse support, Weinberger told reporters that what he sees as a Soviet threat "is clearly increasing in the Pacific, and it is obviously the thing we discuss with each of the countries."