

India-ASEAN Relations in Retrospect

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Abstract

The focal point of India's Look East Policy (LEP) and Act East Policy (AEP) is the region of Southeast Asia and Asia Pacific region, particularly ASEAN nations. Therefore, it is imperative to have a historical understanding of the relationship between India and ASEAN nations. The focus of this paper is to look at the evolution of India – ASEAN relations since India Independence. It focuses mainly on political dimension owing to its primacy during the cold war era of international relations. In highlighting the circumstances and event, the attempt is to discuss the impact of the cold war dynamics that had effectively distorted the mutual relations of India and the ASEAN and factors that created hurdles on the path to forging a mutually beneficial relationship. It also emphasizes on how the virtual absence of economic content in India's foreign policy contributed to the lack of substance in its relationship with ASEAN till 1991.

Key Words: India, ASEAN, Relations, Three Dispensations

I. Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to present a historical linkage between India and ASEAN member states since India's Independence up to the launching of India's Look East Policy. In highlighting the political events, ups and downs of India-ASEAN relations during such period will help us to understand the factors that make India look to Southeast Asia and Asia Pacific region. Further, it mainly focusses on India-ASEAN relations in the context of the Cold war international environment. The paper is divided into the following sections: the introduction is followed by the

understanding of Southeast Asia regional settings in section II. Section III focusses on pre-colonial relations. Section IV focusses on the post-colonial relations (1947-1990) with special reference to the three dispensations and finally, section V concludes the paper.

II. Southeast Asia: Regional settings

Before the Second World War, historians and geographers, especially academics, divided Asia into two - the *Near East* and *Far East*. Present day Southeast Asia (ASEAN) states were included in the Far East. However the term, Southeast Asia was occasionally used by Europeans in the late 19th century.

According to MC Cloud, "It was first brought to general prominence with the establishment of Southeast Asia military command by the British during the Second World War and it is one of the first attempts to bring together the previous fragmented colonial perspectives of British, Dutch, French and American".¹ Actually, the Southeast Asia command was created by the President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill at the first Quebec Conference in August, 1943. Henceforth, Southeast Asia as a political unit was first recognised from the time of Second World War. Milton Osborne, a noted historian of Southeast Asia noted that,

*"For the most part, however, neither the foreigners who worked in Southeast Asia before the second world war, whether as a scholar or otherwise, nor the indigenous inhabitants of the countries of southeast Asia, thought about the region in general terms. The general tendency to do so came with the second world war when, as a result of military circumstances, the concept of a Southeast Asia region began to take hold"*²

Generally, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia including present day Brunei and Singapore, and Indonesia were considered as some kind of geographical unit. However, Philippines was not included. Osborne noted that while the omission of the Philippines was deliberate at the time of the Second World War, the question of whether the Philippines formed part of

Southeast Asia was to remain a matter of scholarly uncertainty as late as the 1960s.³ Presently, Southeast Asia denotes ten nation-states: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam.

Southeast Asia is a part of Asia which lies to the South of China and to the east of India. It is a transitional area between East Asia and South Asia and is sometimes called the tropical Far East. Southeast Asia lies between 28-30°N and 11°S latitudes and between 92,20°E and 141°E longitudes covering a total area of 4, 492,088 sq.km. The whole of Southeast Asia is divided into two areas - Mainland and Maritime.⁴ One unique characteristic of the region is the historical influence of India and China upon its cultures, especially in religion, art and politics.⁵

III. Pre Colonial relations

The significant influence of India on the pre-colonial Southeast Asia is evident from the fact that many authors used the terms like 'Greater India', 'Further India' to refer to Southeast Asia. Micheal Brecher, describing the role of extra-regional powers in Southeast Asia in the pre-colonial era, characterized the Chinese and Indian impacts as the presence of relatively powerful peripheral states whose power gave them de facto membership in the system.⁶ Many Southeast Asian states of the ancient and medieval era derived significant benefits given their location in trade routes

between India and China. In the pre-colonial era, small Southeast Asian states through the control of sea route transformed themselves into larger empires. The rise of the port city-state of Srivijaya between the seventh and thirteen centuries attested to this trend. The command over the sea route between India and China especially control of the straits of Malacca was the basis of its strength and prominence. Malacca, Aceh, Penang and Singapore, all port city-states, followed these examples in the later period.⁷

The robust maritime trade linkage that existed among various ancient and medieval states of India and ASEAN region were shattered with the arrival of the Europeans on the continent in the 17th century. Both sides subsequently embedded into the colonial empires of the British, Dutch, French, Spanish and the Portuguese. The worldview of the people in these lands had been altered to such an extent that they started looking towards their respective colonial masters for political ideas and economic development. As they were not in control of the circumstances, they could not interact much with their immediate neighbours. With the result, the age-old maritime and land connections among them disconnected.

IV. Post-Colonial relations (1947-1990): The three dispensations

Since the focus of the present paper is to have retrospection on India ASEAN relations on the post India independence

of India launched Look East Policy, an attempt has been made in identifying the three stages of India-ASEAN relations. It has been divided into three dispensations, such as the following:

1. 1947 - 1955: Period of Engagement

This period was marked by the revival of contacts between India and Southeast Asia and efforts to create pan-Asian regional associations. It was also the period of high points in their relationship. Jawaharlal Nehru was an ardent advocate of Asian unity. The idea of an Asian Union was present in India much before 1947.⁸ Under his leadership; India convened the Asian Relations Conference in March 1947 that is five months ahead of attaining its independence. India took up the cause of Indonesia's independence in 1947. Even before securing its own freedom India made earnest efforts for the early realization of freedom of Indonesia from the control of the Dutch colonial regime. It convened an international conference in 1949 to support Indonesia's freedom struggle. India also played a crucial role in the Geneva Accords of 1954 regarding the future of Indo-China. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)⁹ Pact of 1954 launched the Cold War politics formally in Asia that subsequently had adverse implications for the relationship between India and ASEAN. The Bandung Conference of April 1955 marked the zenith of India's engagement with Southeast Asia. Nehru's active interest in the Southeast Asian affairs declined after

the Bandung Conference in 1955¹⁰. Consequently, Southeast Asia became an area of secondary importance in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. India's main objective since its independence in Southeast Asia was to assist the creation and support the maintenance of independent states in the region. Paradoxically, India's relation with Southeast Asia had to face the cold war politics nexus between US and Soviet Russia. It really blocked India's intention to come forward with Southeast Asia states. Thus, at the end of this period India's relation with ASEAN countries moved towards distrust and suspicion of each other's moves.

2. 1955-1985: Period of Disengagement

This period provides ample evidence for the pernicious impact of the ideological conflicts that were so pervasive during the Cold War era. India and Southeast Asian nations were caught up in the Cold War politics and could not prevent the extraneous factors from distorting their mutual relationship. This phase marked the beginning of the period of low points in the relationship. The interest in each other waned and both sides drifted apart. On the one hand, India was advocating non-alignment (NAM) as the ideal foreign policy approach for other Third World nations to avoid getting sucked into the vortex of Cold War power politics. On the other hand, Southeast Asian nations were becoming part of the bloc politics. As Thailand and the Philippines were part of SEATO, their

interests clashed with the non-aligned stance of India. Malaysia and Singapore became part of another western alliance of AMDA¹¹. The foreign policy of Indonesia gradually assumed radical tone under the leadership of Sukarno. The goodwill that existed between India and Indonesia existing earlier evaporated completely since the late 1950s.

The contrasting approaches of Nehru and Sukarno towards the issues of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and China, ensured that there was no meeting ground. The 1961 proposal of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Prime Minister of Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia by combining the Federation of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak, Singapore, and Brunei led to a dispute with Indonesia. Indonesia indulged in coercive diplomacy, termed as Konfrontasi (Confrontation) to prevent the formation of the Federation of Malaysia. Its stand was a reflection of the strong ideological passions prevalent during the Cold War era. The lack of economic content in the relationship between India and Southeast Asia further contributed to the drifting of the two sides. India could not contribute substantially to the growth of the Southeast Asian economies. Moreover, the top political leadership in India discounted the possibility of any economic cooperation with Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, efforts were on in Southeast Asia to form regional associations. The first association that was set up for regional cooperation in

Southeast Asia was the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) comprising of Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. This was formed in 1961. However, it remained only in embryonic form owing to the territorial disputes between Malaysia and the Philippines over Sabah (North Borneo). The situation was further aggravated by Sukarno-led Indonesia's policy of 'konfrontasi' (confrontation) against Malaysia.

Gen. Ne Win took over power in Burma after staging a coup in March 1962. His pursuit of 'Burmese Way to Socialism' as the national ideology, autarky as the economic strategy, and isolationism as the foreign policy had completely turned Burma into an inward-looking state and the doors were firmly shut on the international community for the next three decades. It remained outside all blocs throughout the Cold War era in order to observe neutrality rather strictly. Even though it was invited to join ASEAN at the time of its formation in 1967, it refused to do so. Thus it emerged as a barrier that effectively contributed to the lack of physical interaction between India and Southeast Asia until the early 1990s.

The brief border war of October 1962 between Indian and Chinese forces across the Himalayas had been a shattering blow to India's image. It had destroyed all that Nehru had wished and worked for. He had introduced Zhou Enlai to other Afro-Asian leaders, some of whom were apprehensive of China, at Bandung in 1955 to herald a new age of Afro-Asian solidarity. His

dream for Asian unity had been shattered. The border war was a major turning point in the history of India's relationship not only with China but also Southeast Asia. Malaysia, under the leadership of Tunku Abdul Rahman, extended open support to India. On the other hand, India was severely disappointed with the pro-China stand of Indonesia and Vietnam. This subsequently forced India to lose its interest in the Southeast Asian affairs. During the 1965 India-Pakistan war, Malaysia and Singapore extended support to India. But Indonesia's stand supporting Pakistan deeply disappointed India. Singapore, a part of the Federation of Malaysia since 1963, got separated in August 1965 to emerge as an independent state. Narrating the developments that took place on 9 August 1965, the day Singapore got separated from Malaysia to become an independent nation, the statesman of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew writes in his memoirs:

"After meeting with the diplomatic corps, as the diplomats left, I drew aside the Indian deputy high commissioner and the UAR (Egyptian) consul-general and gave them letters for Prime Minister Shastri and President Nasser. India and Egypt were then, with Indonesia, the leading countries in the Afro-Asian movement. In my letters, I sought their recognition and support. From India, I asked for advisers to train an army, and from Egypt, an adviser to build a coastal defence force".¹²

However, India could not extend assistance to Singapore in its need of hour, as it did not want to antagonise Malaysia.

Singapore was displeased with India for being unwilling to offer any military assistance. India nearly withdrew from Southeast Asia during the Indira Gandhi period as it was constrained by various developments in the Indian subcontinent. The separation of India and Southeast Asia was formalised with the launch of the ASEAN in 1967. While earlier efforts at regionalism in Southeast Asia like ASA and Maphilindo were not successful, they laid the groundwork for the launch of the ASEAN, which had the combined membership of the ASA and Maphilindo.

The relentless efforts continued in Southeast Asia to establish a regional association. With the change of regime in Indonesia, the regional environment became more conducive for the formation of another association. The ASA was revived in another form and soon expanded to include Indonesia and the newly independent Singapore and thus the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was born on 8 August 1967 with the signing of the 'Bangkok Declaration'.

India's reaction to Vietnam War was at variance with the stand of ASEAN states, especially Thailand and the Philippines as they were allies of the US. The US-China rapprochement that began in July 1971 with the secret visit of Henry Kissinger to Beijing via Pakistan had resulted in a realignment of forces in Asia. It hastened India to sign the 20-year Treaty of Peace and Friendship with the Soviet Union in August 1971. Both sides were

firmly allied with the opposite camps, that is, India was on the Soviet side and the ASEAN on the American side. Indira Gandhi concluded the treaty "*to create a sense of deterrence for the Chinese and the Americans.*" Although this step helped India tackle the Bangladesh crisis later in the year, it has seriously dented the image of India as a non-aligned nation in the eyes of the ASEAN. Indeed the smaller nations like Singapore were worried about the implications of external intervention.

The ASEAN perceptions of China had undergone a dramatic change in the wake of the normalization of the relations between the US and China and withdrawal of the US from Vietnam. Malaysia took the lead when it established diplomatic relations with China in May 1974. The Philippines and Thailand followed suit in June 1975 and July 1975 respectively.

The North Vietnam forces marched into South Vietnam and with the 'fall of Saigon' in April 1975, Vietnam was reunified after more than two decades. The alarm bells started ringing in the non-communist part of Southeast Asia soon after the defeat of the US-allied Republic of Vietnam by the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam based in Hanoi. The ASEAN, which was maintaining a low profile till then was galvanised into action. Within eight months, the First ASEAN Summit was held in Bali in February 1976. Several momentous decisions in the early history of the ASEAN were taken during this summit. The leaders adopted the Declaration of ASEAN Concord and

signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) laying the guidelines for ASEAN's internal as well as external relations in the political and economic fields. They have also signed an agreement to establish the ASEAN Secretariat. India approached ASEAN to grant it dialogue status on the eve of the Second ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in August 1977. However, it did not materialize.

The Cambodian quagmire became acute with the invasion by Vietnam in December 1978 that replaced the regime of Pol Pot and installed Heng Samrin regime. The stationing of its troops in Cambodia soon brought Vietnam into a severe diplomatic conflict with the ASEAN on the one hand and a military conflict with China on the other hand. Eventually, both ASEAN and China joined hands to resist the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. As Vietnam was perceived to be advancing the Soviet designs in Southeast Asia, the US sided with the ASEAN and China. Thus once again the entire Southeast Asia was caught up in the whirlpool of international power politics of the Second Cold War era with adverse implications for India's relationship with ASEAN states.

India became the first non-communist government in the world to extend recognition to the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) led by Heng Samrin. On the other hand, ASEAN members along with China and the US extended support to the Coalition

Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) that was established as a government-in-exile to resist the Heng Samrin regime backed by Vietnam and the Soviet Union.

China's new 'Open Door' policy under the pragmatic leadership of Deng Xiaoping announced in mid-December 1978 had meanwhile set China on a radically new path both internally and externally. Deng Xiaoping, in order to build a powerful market economy, infused a strong economic content into the formulation of the Chinese foreign policy. China soon started the process of closely integrating itself with the Capitalist economies of the West, Japan, and ASEAN. The invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam in late December 1978 proved to be a windfall for China. Since then China managed to move closer to the US and ASEAN in the diplomatic sphere by harmonizing its Vietnam policy with that of the latter. The frequent diplomatic interaction between China and Thailand has brought the former closer to the ASEAN. The habit of cooperation forged between ASEAN and China during the handling of Cambodian issue had considerably narrowed down the gulf between them.

Thus during the decade of the 1980s, the alienation of ASEAN from India coincided with the growing interaction between China and the former. This trend was to exert the tremendous effect on the development of ASEAN's relations with China and India in the following decade.

With the benefit of retrospection, it may be stated that the Chinese stand on the Cambodian issue abridged its diplomatic gap with the ASEAN. On the other hand, India's stance on the same issue created diplomatic barriers to having fruitful exchanges with the ASEAN.

The relations between India and founder members of ASEAN were set to improve during the Janata Government. ASEAN was all set to invite India as a Dialogue Partner in May 1980. However, India's recognition of Heng Samrin regime in Cambodia was severely criticized by ASEAN countries. So the earlier attempt at initiating ASEAN-India dialogue partnership proved to be a non-starter and the relations remained almost frozen until the end of the Cold War that paved the way for the resolution of Cambodian conflict. Dr. Mahathir became the Prime Minister of Malaysia in July 1981 and soon Malaysia embarked on 'Look East' policy aimed at learning and implementing the highly successful economic development model of Japan and also of South Korea.

Being a prominent statesman of the region, his views counted a lot while setting the agenda of ASEAN's external policy and relations. His 'Look East' policy was also responsible for his later initiatives like East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) and even ASEAN+3 forums. Thus during this period, the relations between India and ASEAN are overwhelmed by a political difference. Cold war politics envelop the whole

international system. Asia continent is a fertile soil for the race, consequently the repercussion in a political difference between India and ASEAN.

3. 1985 - 1991: Prelude to Re-engagement

Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power in the Soviet Union in 1985 was one of the most remarkable events of the twentieth century. By launching groundbreaking reforms both in the domestic as well as the global arena, he set in motion the train of events that had far-reaching consequences across the world within a short span of time. "If any single man ended some forty years of global cold war it was he."¹³ His historic Vladivostok speech of 28 July 1986 marked a quantum leap forward in the dissipation of Cold War tensions in the Asia Pacific. Indeed, the renewed engagement between India and the ASEAN region itself was one of the 'peace dividends' of the end of the Cold War.

The Group of 7 (G-7) advanced industrialised states, viz. Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, UK, and the US, was established in September 1985. All these high-income economies have decided to come together to set the global economic agenda. Although all these states happened to be the dialogue partners of ASEAN, the latter became increasingly concerned about their position in the emerging international economic order.

The Rajiv Gandhi government launched efforts to engage ASEAN

countries. His economic liberalization initiative and the recession of ASEAN economies raised hopes for the greater level of economic cooperation. However, the economic reforms introduced by the Rajiv Gandhi administration in 1985 were merely preliminary steps at structural adjustment. The overhaul of the Indian economic system was to commence six years later. The substantial shift in economic development strategy from import substitution to export-led one took place only in 1991 in a response to the unprecedented economic crisis.

The internal political changes since 1988 had deepened the Myanmar muddle and increased the Chinese influence. The junta in Myanmar established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in September 1988 in the wake of student demonstrations. Soon after the National League for Democracy (NLD) was formed to establish a democratic form of government under the charismatic leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (the daughter of the national independence hero, Gen Aung San). She was placed under house arrest in July 1989. However, the NLD registered an emphatic victory by securing eighty per cent of seats and sixty per cent of votes in the general elections held in May 1990. But the Myanmar generals refused to transfer the power to the NLD. The dissident NLD members formed the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) in exile at a rebel camp on Myanmar's border with Thailand. India and Thailand that share long land frontiers

with Myanmar, witnessed a massive influx of refugees and pro-democracy activists. Meanwhile, the international community awarded the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in recognition of her non-violent struggle to establish democracy in Myanmar.¹⁴

The normalization of relations between India and China symbolized by the visit of the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, to Beijing in December 1988 opened a new chapter in their turbulent relationship. The Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng visited India in December 1991. The visit was the first by a Chinese Premier after a long gap of thirty-one years. This visit was a further step on the path towards the normalization of the relations between India and China.

The growing shift in East Asia towards geo-economics away from the traditional preoccupation with geo-politics was reflected in Thailand's clarion call in 1988 to "turn battlefields into marketplaces" in the Indo-China. The shift has changed the terms of diplomatic discourse in the region and increasingly nations began giving higher priority to the economic interests. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) was established in 1989, with 12 founding members.¹⁵ In other words, the membership comprised of the six members of ASEAN and its six dialogue partners, viz. Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and the US. In November 1991, APEC admitted three new members, namely People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Chinese Taipei

(Taiwan) in a significant move that maintained the momentum towards the growing trend of geo- economics. The center of world politics and economics has now shifted to the Pacific Ocean.

Vietnam's withdrawal of troops from Cambodia in 1989 was akin to fall of the Berlin Wall in the region. With this step, Vietnam paved the way for the emergence of 'one Southeast Asia'. Cambodia conflict was finally resolved with the disengagement of all external forces and the formal end of Cambodia conflict was marked by the Paris Peace Agreement signed in October 1991. Vietnam, by adopting the policy of 'befriending all' at the Seventh National Party Congress of the Communist Party in 1991, has decided to improve relations with the ASEAN and normalize relations with China and the US. In a nutshell, it can be summed up that the domestic and international trends since 1985 created a new context for India and ASEAN to perceive each other in a more positive light. India and the ASEAN region have finally become free of Cold War arrangements and were free to refashion their alignments afresh in the

emerging international system, without any ideological impediments, while keeping their own national strategic and economic interests in mind. Therefore, this period is given a nomenclature of prelude to re-engagement.

V. CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be concluded that India's relations with ASEAN nations passed through different stages during 1947 – 1990 i.e. from the period of engagement to period of disengagement and had entered a period of re-engagement at the beginning of 1990s. It is to be remembered that India's Look East Policy is preceded by this structural change in India's foreign policy dimensions. High politics of cold war which prevailed for almost four decades put a stumbling block on the relations of India and ASEAN. The prison of political ideology on which both India and ASEAN nations were trapped no more exists in the international relations structure. At present, there is the way for reopening and reengagement of their relationship with new element of economic vigour which was missing in the last four decades of their relations.

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³ Ibid, p.14

⁴Tiwari R.C. "*Geography of South east Asia in India Interactions with Southeast Asia*", New Delhi, project of History of Indian Science, philosophy and culture, Centre for Studies in Civilization, 2006, p.17

⁵Ibid.p.18

⁶ Michael Brecher, "History of Southeast Asia: Pre Colonial Period", in Robert O.Tilman (ed.), "*Man, State and Society in Contemporary Southeast Asia*", New York, 1971.p.21

⁷Ibid.p.24.

⁸ Ton That Thien, "*India and South East Asia: 1947-1960*", Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1963, pp. 60-61.

⁹ It is also called Manila Pact. It is Military Alliance which was formed on September 8, 1954, when the representatives of Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States signed the South East Asia Collective Defence Treaty (SEACDT) in Manila, the eight countries which became the members of this organisation were described as SEATO.

¹⁰ D. R. Sar Desai, "India and Southeast Asia", in B.R. Nanria. (ed.). *Indian Foreign Policy: The Nehru Years* (Delhi: Vikas, 1976), pp. 78-101. Also see Charles H. Heimsath and Surjit Mansingh, *A Diplomatic History of Modern India* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1971), Chapter IX, "Relations with Non-aligned States in Southeast Asia", pp. 225-47 and Chapter X, "Relations with Aligned States in Southeast Asia", pp. 248-71.

¹¹AMDA stands for Anglo Malayan Defence Agreement

¹² Lee Kuan Yew, "The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew". Singapore: Times Editions, 1998, p. 15. also see Lee Khoo Choy, *Diplomacy of a Tiny State*, 2nd ed. (Singapore: World Scientific, 1993), p.31. The decision of Singapore in the late 1960s to choose Israel as its most suitable defence partner was justified "by a reluctance on the part of non-aligned states, such as India and Egypt, which Singapore had sought to cultivate, to offend Malaysia by becoming involved in the Republic's military development." Michael Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 65.

¹³ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 479.

¹⁴Baladas Ghoshal, "*India and Southeast Asia*", in A. K. Damodaran, and U. S. Bajpai, (eds), *Indian Foreign Policy: The Indira Gandhi Years*. New Delhi: Radiant, 1990, pp. 180-97.

¹⁵Namely Australia, Brunei, Canada, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and the US.