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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: November 17, 1971

SUBJECT: Neutralization of Southeast Asia

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PARTICIPANTS: Minister Pablo R. Suarez, Philippine Embassy
Rodolfo C. Severino, Jr., Philippine Embassy
Richard E. Usher, Director, Philippine Affairs

COPIES TO: Embassy Manila (2)
EA
EA/PHL (2)
EA/RA
INR/REA - Mrs. Hubbert
INR-9

Minister Suarez and Mr. Severino called on me pursuant to a request Suarez had made on November 11 for an opportunity to discuss with someone in the Department the subject of neutralization of Southeast Asia. At the time he requested the discussion, Suarez had explained that the Philippine Embassy in Washington was "getting some fallout from Manila" about proposals for an ASEAN conference about neutrality for Southeast Asia. Suarez had asked whether he could talk to someone here who could tell him what the Department knew or thought about such an idea.

I started off the conversation by saying that we really don't know what exactly is meant by these proposals for neutralization of Southeast Asia. I said I had seen some UPI dispatches printed in the Manila newspapers which reported that the ASEAN Foreign Ministers were to meet in Kuala Lumpur on November 25 to discuss a Malaysian idea for neutrality in Southeast Asia. I said the same article had reported that the Thai's were preparing a draft for consideration and that the draft would call for a "neutrality zone in Southeast Asia."

Suarez did not volunteer any exposition of what might be intended by the idea of neutralization. He did not think any

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of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers had any very clear idea themselves. I said that if what was being discussed was the objective of achieving a state of stability and tranquility in Southeast Asia which would be free from pressures and threats from outside, that, of course, was a desirable thing and a goal toward which we all aspired.

The question was how do you get there from the situation which now prevails. We could see problems arising from an ASEAN declaration of a neutralized Southeast Asia to take effect forthwith. I proceeded to bring out the points contained in para 7 of State cable 209716, noting the problems that would be created with respect to the status of regional security pacts, U.S. bases in the Philippines and the desirability of ascertaining the views of the Indo China countries as to the problems which a neutralization declaration might create for them.

I pointed out that we would be particularly concerned by any declaration that would make it difficult for the U.S. to render assistance to requesting countries of the area who might face security threats posed by communist subversion or insurgency.

Suarez referred to the Malaysian view that the U.S., along with the USSR and Peking, was sympathetic to the idea of neutralization. I said that apparently was based on some remarks made by Razak following a meeting he had had recently with President Nixon. In response to Suarez' further question I observed, that apparently President Nixon had made some sympathetic response to the concept of neutrality as a policy for Malaysia, but that he had not intended this to mean that he thought it would be a good idea to neutralize all of Southeast Asia.

Suarez wanted to know what the U.S. would do if Peking and Moscow were to come out in public support of a Southeast

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Asia neutrality zone proposal. I replied that, that, of course, would create a difficult situation because it would seem to leave those two countries free to avail themselves of their practiced subversive tactics while at the same time providing them a basis to criticize and oppose the U.S. economic aid and MAP as intervention or violation of the neutralization arrangements.

Suarez said that the proposals that were being discussed seemed to call for a guarantee of Southeast Asian neutrality by the USSR, China and the U.S. Suarez noted, in passing, that the proposals did not contemplate asking for a guarantee from Japan, which Suarez seemed to think strange. In any case, Suarez wanted to know how the U.S. would respond to a request for such a guarantee. I replied that one would have to consider what we would be guaranteeing exactly and against whom would the guarantee be directed. Suarez thought there were two elements. One would be a guarantee by each of the three outside powers against intervention by either of the other two and also against aggression by the Southeast Asian states against one another. I commented that I did not see how such a guarantee system could ever come about and that I did not think it would come about. I said I could see the possibility that in the future one might hope for some kind of tacit understanding amongst the big powers that none would act in such a way as to upset the balance in the area and in such a way as to leave the area open to all, but dominated by none.

I went on to point out that insofar as the U.S. is concerned, the Nixon Doctrine takes the position that initiatives and policies in Southeast Asia for Southeast Asia should come from the countries of the area and that, when asked, the U.S. would support those initiatives and policies with AID and MAP where appropriate.

Suarez said he thought that the Southeast Asian countries in seeking a neutrality arrangement were motivated by a fear that perhaps the U.S. would withdraw from the area and leave a vacuum, into which the power of the USSR and Peking would be drawn. Suarez thought the idea of the neutrality scheme

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was to try to forestall that sequence of events.

I observed that it seemed to me that he had put his finger on the key consideration, which was that the Southeast Asian nations were seeking security. The question then would be whether a neutrality proposal would enhance or endanger Southeast Asian security. I went on to say that if the Southeast Asian nations were questioning the future role of the U.S., I thought they should take note of what U.S. spokesmen have been saying. The U.S. regards itself as a Pacific power; the U.S. intends to maintain a military presence in the Western Pacific; and the U.S. intends to preserve its ability to live up to its commitments to its Asian allies.

I concluded with the observation that we, of course, are glad to see the Southeast Asian countries examining these questions and seeking these goals of stability and security and, of course, the Nixon Doctrine emphasizes our respect and support for Asian initiatives. I reflected that this neutrality proposal seemed to take hold of so many of the threads of policy of the nations of the area in such a significant way that it was hard to foresee how a neutrality declaration might in the end rearrange the whole fabric of international relationships in the area.

Both Suarez and Severino seemed throughout the conversation quite relaxed and quite comfortable with the comments I was making. Both tend[illegible] to take a rather deprecating attitude toward the neutrality zone concept. In fact, they observed at the conclusion of the conversation that they really did not expect the ASEAN Foreign Ministers to get very far with such a proposal and they thought it most unlikely that anything concrete would result from the November 25 meeting.

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