

## FOCUS

**"ASEAN 10", Bangladesh and SAARC**

by Dr Abul Kalam

**of the grouping.****Primacy of Economics**

It is largely economics, rather than politics, that placed priority in ASEAN decision making. The rationale behind ASEAN decision to induct the three countries sooner than later was to allow them to adjust faster to the AFTA tariff-cut schedule. ASEAN is, in essence, a free-trade area: "The more free-traders, the merrier." There is a perceived security argument. With the admission of the three to the ASEAN club, it will group together all ten Southeast Asian countries. That may help maintain the balance of power in Asia. Myanmar's admission will keep that country from falling under China's sway. In addition, the current divisive nature of politics and ideology involving the new members, it is felt, are likely to be swept aside once they join the club. The idea is to pursue a policy of "constructive engagement" so that the ASEAN with its own span of a variety of political systems may cajole the new members with troublesome behaviour into moderating their worst excesses.

As a matter of principle, there is indeed good reasoning for taking the new members. Whatever may be the "intend and purpose" of the ASEAN decision to admit the new members, from July 1997 onward ASEAN will be brought to the door-steps of Bangladesh and SAARC. Bangladesh has a special concern: its immediate ASEAN neighbour (from July onward), Myanmar, is "in the grip of a thuggish military junta."

**AFTA and SAFTA**

For under-developed Bangladesh, and its relatively better-off neighbours, such as India and Pakistan, the ASEAN economic experiment is a lesson they must take into consideration in any South Asian free trade arrangements (SAFTA),

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which is supposed to be operational in 2001, two years ahead of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA).

The new members of the ASEAN will be given 10 years from January 1998 to comply with tariff cuts required under a plan to create AFTA, to be in place by 2003, allowing them extra five years to phase in the changes after the AFTA comes into force, considering their under-developed status. Experts view the integration of the three countries into AFTA, which would create a free trade area of 500 million people, as one of the bigger challenges facing ASEAN. In case of South Asia, with over a billion and a quarter population, the challenges could be still bigger. Especially the poorer economies of Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal would find it extremely difficult to cope with the regional giants such as India and Pakistan in economic competitiveness.

**Lesson for SAARC**

South Asia and the SAARC have a lot to learn from the neighbouring region and its regional entity ASEAN. ASEAN has won respect for successfully quelling tensions between its own members, such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. ASEAN has shown its dynamism, innovation and leadership both in development cooperation as well as in security dialogue. It provided a model of market-driven, export-led development that is being widely imitated. The intra-ASEAN growth triangles often referred to for similar attempts else-

where. It has shaped the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Asia's only regional dialogue for security matters. It has also brought together the countries of three continents for Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC), which has committed the countries concerned to free trade arrangements by the year 2010.

ASEAN has thus already developed itself as a truly "merchandise trade oriented society", while SAARC nations remain utterly trapped in poverty. Both ASEAN and SAARC have within each and between them asymmetric features and both have diverse socio-economic and cultural characteristics.

**Outline of Inter-regional Co-operation**

The SAARC Charter (Article 1) contemplates the possibility of inter-regional cooperation; but a consensus decision and a clear-cut policy directive on the issue is yet to emerge. Hence a SAARC perspective on inter-regional cooperation with the ASEAN is yet to take shape.

However, there already exists an outline for a SAARC-ASEAN co-operative relations in the functional mechanisms such as the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), in the emphasis of south-south cooperation by the Group of 77, in the series of intra-regional trade promotion talks and Ministerial Conferences held under their auspices where countries of both the subregions had participated in their current

"Western tilt" — with no major contradiction in overall security objective — and in their overall conceptual adherence to cooperative engagement and/or security, interdependent development etc. Evidently, efforts are there, especially at the ASEAN end, to intensify actions and identify areas with a view to working towards an integrated approach to subregional and inter-regional cooperation.

More importantly, because of the expanding nature of the market economy that currently influences policies in both the subregions, the mounting debt crisis, especially in South Asia, the need to combine efforts in such areas as investment, finance, and technology geared to attain collective self-reliance, and finally the need to coordinate and apply mutual preferential treatment in shaping mutual economic relations as well as strengthen mutual security — all these provide substantial room for closer ties between ASEAN and SAARC.

There are intangible or less discernible processes which, in fact, may have much impact on the realization of the common objectives. Whether a formal structure of a cooperative approach or a more non-formal approach of a dialogue, both bilateral exchange or summity and/or multilateral interaction, as experienced by the ASEAN, seem to provide a uniquely interesting model of subregional cooperation in Asia.

**Divergence and Commonalities**

There are, of course, elements of both inter-regional and intra-regional divergences in terms of confronting problems, vulnerabilities, threats to the economies and economic performances of certain member states as well as mutual threat perceptions. But they also have a broad spectrum of mutuality and commonality of interests. Apart from this general framework of motivations there are variety of reasons connected with the continued distortions in systemic economic order that leave substantial room for closer cooperation and partnership ties between the two geographically contiguous regions. However, until recently there has not been any impressive movement in this direction between the subregional entities.

There is sufficient scope for co-operation between the two subregional groupings and also for Bangladeshi involvement with the member states of these two geographically contiguous regions.

Dhaka has a number of important concerns in fostering closer relationships between itself and SAARC and the member states of the ASEAN. As the prime mover of the SAARC idea Bangladesh has a role to play in bringing about co-operative partnership between the two subregions. Its own interests dictate the need for developing such relations. In pure economic matters such as trade, the pattern of trade of Bangladesh indicates that the

country had more trade, and significantly more favourable trading within the ASEAN area, than in the SAARC region.

**Bangladesh Looks East**

Bangladesh has attached a priority in forging closer links with its East and Southeast Asian neighbours, having been leaned toward a "Look East" policy. Singapore has emerged as a leading trading partner and commercial relations with other ASEAN countries have also shown marked improvement. Bangladesh also may get closer to the ASEAN by replicating their development model with an export-led growth, based on a labour intensive approach and an extensive use of indigenous raw materials. It may endeavour to benefit from possible relocation of some of the labour-intensive industries from some of the ASEAN countries to South Asia. It has already evoked a lot of sympathy over the exodus of the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, from some of the ASEAN countries, notably, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, who expressed concern over the treatment of its Muslim minorities by the

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Yangon military junta. Now as Myanmar is being admitted as a member state and into the APEC and ARF, as projected, Bangladesh will then become a truly ASEAN bordering state, or perhaps more appropriately a "land-bridge" between ASEAN and SAARC. A number of inter-regional issues then is likely to crop up between the two subregional entities.

Of interest to Bangladesh, as an ASEAN bordering state, is also ASEAN's plan to curb cross-border pollution, adopted in June 1995 ASEAN's Environmental Ministers meeting in Kuala Lumpur. Of similar interest to Bangladesh, being close proximity to the ASEAN subregion, is the issue of narcotics and drug control adopted under a Plan of Action on Drug Abuse Control by the ASEAN Standing Committee in Nov-Dec 1994. As Bangladesh mooted the idea of regionalism in South Asia and played the catalytic role in creating the SAARC, it has to play an equally pioneering role in forging partnership between the two subregions.

**ASEAN and SAARC : Changing Perceptions**

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The prospect of co-operative partnership between ASEAN and SAARC may be viewed in the context of the foregoing general frame. The ASEAN experience of inter-regional co-operation, particularly its window of "partnership" relations may be judged in this context and would seem to provide useful input for promoting relations between the two Asian subregions. Pakistan has acquired ASEAN's sectoral dialogue partnership, while India's sectoral status is upgraded into one of a dialogue partner. It seems surprising that Bangladesh failed to pursue an institutionalized approach to its relationship with the ASEAN.

**Bay of Bengal Bloc :****BISTEC**

The idea of a new economic grouping, styled the "Bay of Bengal Economic Cooperation Organization", has been mooted for some time as a bridge between the SAARC and the ASEAN countries. The news of the organization may be seen a welcome development, as there

economic arrangement involving the countries of the two Asian subregions. A proposal however well-meaning it may seem, should have been articulated at least for public consumption and debate. A personalized approach of decision making, at whatever level may be, is always suspect and prevents consensus-building, which is a sine qua non for success of such a co-operative entity. The second point relates to national interest. No country should lay claim, or be allowed any unusual claim, to the Bay of Bengal waters without full appraisal of reciprocal rights and privileges. The frequent intrusion of the Thai fish-trawlers off Bangladesh coast is a case in point. That often creates a lot of bad-blood between the two otherwise friendly neighbouring countries. But there may be others, especially involving the exploitation of resources underneath the Bay. Care must be taken to secure Bangladesh's national interest.

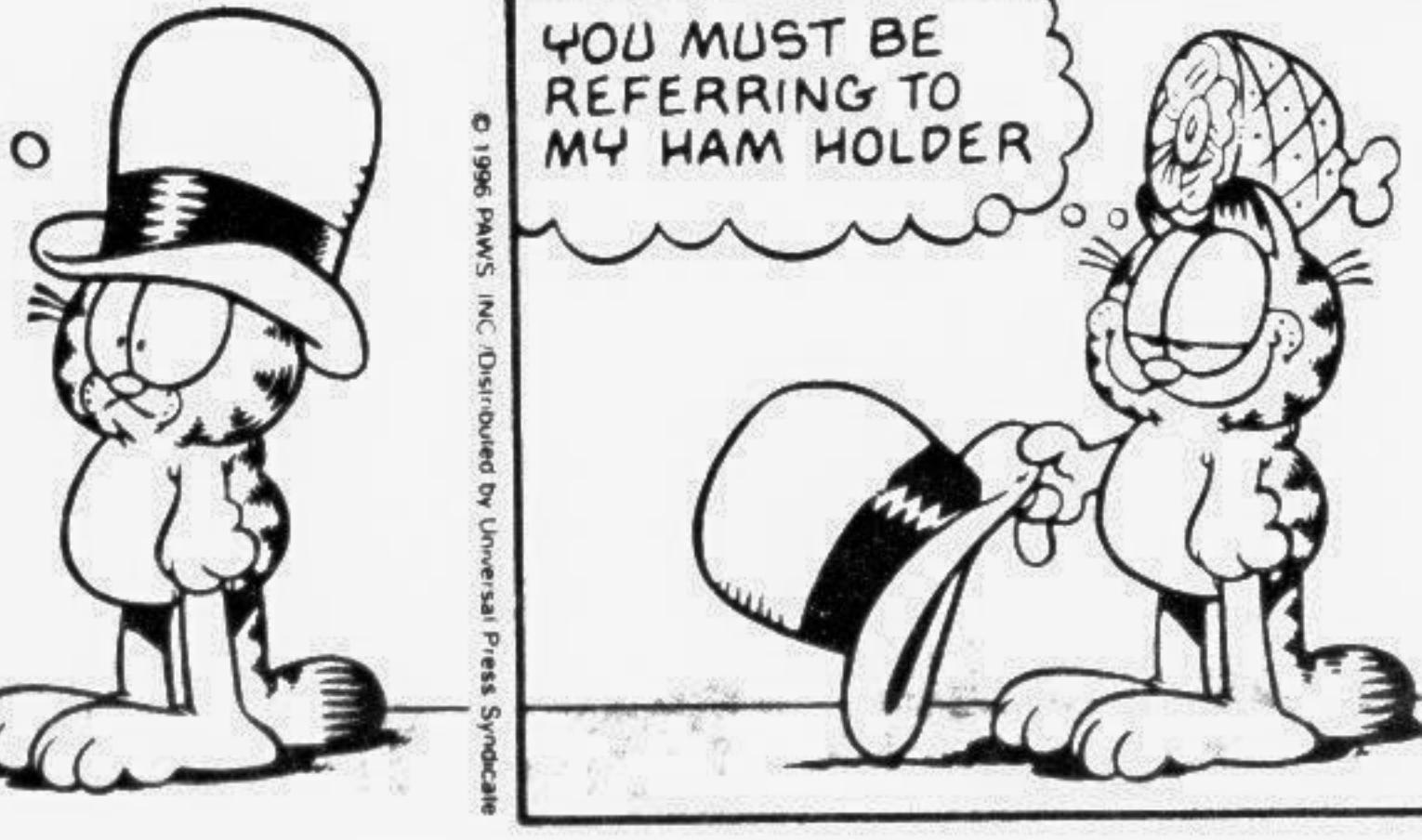
The third and final point concerns the motivation of the original sponsors. As Bangladesh State Minister for Foreign Affairs Abul Hasan Chowdhury stated that the new grouping, as originally mooted by India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, did not contemplate inclusion of Bangladesh in it. It seems surprising that the ASEAN and the ASEAN countries, the news of the organization may be seen a welcome development, as there

In the current context it seems quite appropriate to pursue, as well, the old IOR interest, given friendlier regimes in both New Delhi and Dhaka, while building a new edifice of co-operative structure linking the coastal shores of the Bay of Bengal. The new proposition would be truly more fitting and logical in terms of geographic proximity and economic reasons, if both Myanmar and Malaysia are drawn into it as full members. More importantly, the new economic grouping would also link the giant neighbouring India to a symmetrical frame of wider regional interaction, putting a cap on its power asymmetry in the process of bringing the two geographically linked subregions closer together. This, hopefully, would usher in a new era of co-operation and understanding between and among the small state-actors and their bigger colossus of Asia, provided that the new quadrangle does not allow itself to serve as a mere "sideshow" to dilute the end of more pronounced, strategic entity, planned to serve the objective requirements of the much-treasured "India doctrine."

The author is a Professor of International Relations, University of Dhaka.

**Garfield ®**

HAT?



by Jim Davis

JAN FLEMING'S

James Bond



THAT GOSSIP-COLUMN ITEM ABOUT THE RUBIES SEEMS TO HAVE DONE THE TRICK, JAMES!



DRAWN BY JOHN MCCLUSKY

Body formed to identify, lease khas land

**No plan to repeal Vested Property Act: Mosharraf tells JS**

By Staff Correspondent

was announced through a gazette notification last month," he told parliament in reply to a question from Md Shahidul Islam (BNP-Jhenaidah).

On a supplementary from A S M Firoze (AL-Pirojpur), the state minister said that the committee would start work for identification and distribution of khas land in a month or two.

"I guarantee that the khas lands will be distributed among the real-landless people only," he said adding that he had talked on this matter with representatives of various peasants' families under the policy.

**AUB offers MBA course from Sept**

Asian University of Bangladesh (AUB) will offer MBA course from September this year, a press release of the university said yesterday, reports BSS.

Interested candidates have been advised to contact the admission office of the university at house-9, road-7, sector-7, Uttara model town, Dhaka-1230.

Major General Mohammad Anwar Kabir Talukdar (NDC-PSC) GOC, Rangpur area is ex-

pected to be the chief guest of the inaugural session, said Tarique Hassan, President of the Rangpur Old Cadets Reunion Committee.

Interested cadets are requested to contact Hassan at his office at room no. 51 (first floor), Aziz Cooperative Market, Shahbagh, Dhaka. The contact telephone numbers are 867054, 858283 (office), and 863181, 861773 (residence).

Those willing to take part on the occasion are requested to get them registered from June 18 to 25 between 2 pm and 4 pm at the school premises, according to a press release issued by Prof Selina Bahar Zaman, convener of the reunion committee.

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Prof Dr Muzaffar Ahmed addressing the launching ceremony of UNDP Human Development Report 1997 at the CIRDAP auditorium in the city yesterday. Khushi Kabir, Dr Mashirul Rahman and UNDP official Michael Constable were also present.



— Star photo

**Indian orthopaedist says Acid-burned people not burden of society**

An Indian orthopaedist yesterday said the acid-burned people are not the burden of our society as their injuries could be cured like other burn injuries, reports UNB.

He also examined two acid-burned patients and said there is no difference between acid burn and other burn injuries.

Prof Antia said the initial treatment of such injuries is not much expensive but it's time consuming for those who suffered seriously. In some cases, he said, a series of operations like corneal and skin graftings are needed for full recovery.

Citing his working experience with the burn patients in Mumbai, Prof Antia said the sufferings of the acid-burned patients intensify for lack of adequate knowledge and information.

this region including Bangladesh," the Indian surgeon told the journalists.

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**Bhutanese envoy calls on Sajeda**

Ambassador of Bhutan to Bangladesh Lyonpo Tashi Tobgyal made a courtesy call on Environment and Forest Minister Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury at her office yesterday, reports UNB.

They discussed matters relating to social, economic and environment of both the countries and hoped that the existing relations between the two countries would further be strengthened in the days ahead.

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