
Malaysia

Take Kra Canal off 'dust-ridden shelf'

by Susan Maitra in New Delhi

The present resurgence of enthusiasm within Thailand for building a canal through the Kra Isthmus in southern Thailand, rekindled through a joint campaign of the *EIR* and the Fusion Energy Foundation led by Lyndon LaRouche, is beginning to catch on in the rest of the region. Speaking at a seminar on "Southeast Asia in the 1980s" at the National University of Malaysia on March 16, Malaysian Foreign Minister Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie asked regional leaders "to give serious consideration to the idea of constructing a canal across the Isthmus of Kra."

Foreign Minister Shafie pointed out that the vitally important and strategic Straits of Malacca are becoming a potential hazard due to increasing traffic. In Shafie's words:

"As is well known, the narrow Malacca Straits are getting shallower with the years brought on by sand shift and increased silting due to development in the littoral states. Added to that is the rapid increase in the international traffic of ships through the Straits. The shallowing and the congestion of the Straits has naturally increased our concern in the safety of navigation in the Straits. There have already been a number of collisions of ships, and the resultant pollution of the Straits affects the ecology along our coasts and consequently the livelihood of our fishermen."

The Foreign Minister went on to explain that there is already in existence a tripartite committee on the safety of navigation in the Malacca Straits, comprised of Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. While the committee can oversee safety of navigation, prevention of pollution, and conservation of the marine ecology, it is evident to Shafie that many ships, especially those with deeper draughts, such as giant oil tankers and other "naval juggernauts," should be using other routes.

An idea 'come of age'

"Of course such routes cost more in terms of time and expense to the international shippers and navies, and there may be, therefore, natural resistance to the idea," the Foreign

Minister continued, developing the logic for the Kra Canal. "Perhaps a logical progression of such thoughts on the matter is to give serious consideration to the idea of construction of a canal across the Isthmus of Kra, an idea which perhaps has come of age and should be resuscitated out of some dust-ridden shelves or safe. While the actualization of this project, if at all feasible, will be in the context of the decade of the 1990s and beyond, it is perhaps timely in the decade of the 1980s for us, and particularly our Thai neighbors, to give yet one more consideration to it.

"In my view the Kra Canal project will not only answer the problem of congestion in the Malacca Straits but it will also serve the economic and security interests of Thailand, while also serving the developmental and economic interests of Langkawi[Island], as a result of the spinoffs from such a project. Indeed, it would provide yet another framework of economic cooperation between the two neighboring countries with, of course, the participation of other interested parties, notably Japan, whose vital national interests are involved."

Giant workplace

In the LaRouche concept of the canal, which puts the project in the context of five Great Projects for infrastructure construction in the Pacific basin, the canal would become a radiating center for the industrialization of all Southeast Asia. It is projected that not only would goods go through the canal, but that the canal region would be a point at which unfinished goods could be worked up into finished products. The idea is to take advantage of the flow of goods through the canal and turn the Kra Isthmus, which is currently totally underdeveloped industrially, into a giant workplace. This, of course, would not only benefit the Thai-Malay peninsula, but would have a nonlinear impact on the industrial capacity of all Southeast Asia.

From this standpoint, officials of the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority can see only benefits to be derived from the canal's construction. The government has made a strenuous effort to provide the facilities conducive to foreign interests for joint venture industry. And for Malaysia in particular, the canal would alleviate an absurd transportation problem. Under British colonialism, Malaysian roads and transport systems were all pointed toward the west—and Europe—from the interior. Without a cross-country water and road system, Malaysian companies in the north often send their goods, unfinished and finished, from the west through the Malacca Straits and back around toward the north.

Simultaneously, industrialization in the eastern, jungle-terrain region has lagged significantly behind that in the west. By providing a cheap means of linking the eastern and western sections of Malaysia, the canal opens up 1) opportunities for industrialization on both sides of the country; and 2) a cheap means of transport both internally and eastward toward the rest of Asia.