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Indochina's S.E. Asian Neigh

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MANILA, Jan. 6 — Indicating their concern for the future of Southeast Asia, the foreign ministers of the neighboring countries most directly affected by the ending of the Vietnam war have agreed to meet in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, within eight days of the signing of the cease-fire.

The five countries of Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) — Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand — had earlier agreed to make a careful study of the implications of the Vietnam cease-fire agreement.

Not least of these will be the impact on Asean itself. Since the five-nation body was set up in Bangkok in 1967 following another regional conflict — Indonesia's "confrontation" with Malaysia and Singapore — Asean has considerably broadened its interest in co-operation.

If the foreign ministers conclude that the Vietnam war is really ended, they will have to decide whether to expand their organization. Some Asean members would like to follow next month's conference with one also including the two Vietnams, Laos, Cambodia and Burma.

Authoritative sources indi-

cate that the foreign ministers will almost certainly be privately discussing several key issues, including the future relationship between the ASEAN countries and the Indochinese states.

At various times South Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian representatives have attended ASEAN gatherings as observers. North Vietnam has sometimes expressed hostility to the grouping.

The majority would only consider widening ASEAN membership if both Vietnams were willing to join. ASEAN diplomatic recognition of both Vietnams is another question the foreign ministers are expected to

discuss. Indonesia alone has relations with both Vietnamese capitals.

Another question for ASEAN is how to align their respective foreign policies in the post-Vietnam era. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Juan Yew has made it clear recently that he expects U.S. retention of bases in Thailand, with that country serving as a buffer between Indochina and the other four ASEAN countries. Lee met the Thai leaders in Bangkok recently and reached agreement on this.

The Indonesians continue to stress the "temporary" nature of foreign bases in the ASEAN area, but the In-

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Indonesian military in particular want U.S. forces to remain for the time being. The Filipinos, with two major U.S. bases on their soil providing considerable employment also take that view.

The Malaysians place greater store on the neutralization of the area, in which foreign bases are gradually removed in return for superpower guarantees of neutrality and noninterference. All ASEAN countries have agreed to this ultimate objective — the differences the foreign ministers will have to reconcile concern how and when to achieve it.

Still another question is

relations between the ASEAN countries and China. The five ASEAN countries (all of which have Maoist insurgents, as well as sizeable overseas Chinese minorities) have already agreed to move jointly on this issue. They once thought in terms of diplomatic relations with China only in the context of neutralization. But the Japanese, Australian and New Zealand governments have all now established diplomatic relations with Peking, thus forcing the issue for ASEAN.

Meanwhile, initial ASEAN official reaction to the cease-fire announcement by

President Nixon was naturally, optimistic, with an underlying note of caution.

Despite the U.S. argument that the huge American presence was originally meant to "Save Southeast Asia," the ASEAN countries have not all been consulted on the progress of the Paris negotiations, although Washington did consult Thailand.

When the October draft agreement was published before the U.S. presidential election, it was privately greeted with some skepticism by the leaders in the area. The size and scope of the cease-fire force, together with the precise degree of

diplomatic recognition accorded the Saigon government will be the two main issues ASEAN leaders will examine in the fine print of the agreement.

Even if there is satisfaction on these two key points, undoubtedly the foreign ministers will be privately discussing, in Kuala Lumpur, whether the war is ended merely in regard to American involvement or in a longer term sense. As one top official puts it, "We hope to be discussing the problems of peace rather than the problems of war — but peace and war, in our region are not always clearly distinguished."