

# DEVELOPMENT OF A MALAYAN FOREIGN POLICY<sup>1</sup>

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MALAYAN FOREIGN POLICY owes more to the personality of its Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, than is usual even in the foreign policies of new states.<sup>2</sup> We can see written all over it his personal qualities: his modesty, his habit of playing by ear and relying on political intuition, his good-humoured friendliness to all around him; and his mild but strongly-held attachment first to the happiness and next to the dignity of ordinary people — Malays first and other non-whites next, but without personal bitterness. This is the Tunku's attractive and playful personality, so surprising in a successful prime minister, and this has served Malaya well. We should not expect from the Tunku any great subtlety or much argument from principle. We might guess that if his briefs were too detailed they would not be read. And it is possible to look for more consistency than can be found.

Yet every foreign minister has to play a different hand, dealt by geography and history, and the forces of internal and external politics. We can study the hand first, and then the way it has been played.

Geography has made Malaya a peninsula, in the midst of almost a continent of islands; a small nation among small nations, but with a large and disintegrating island nation in sight of its shores. It still has some strategic importance as bridge or barrier, which gives it some anxieties about Chinese or Indian strategic doctrine, though the former is at present more important than the latter.

History has given it a plural society, in which a small proportion of the Malays and much larger (though diminishing) proportions of the Chinese and Indians look to larger countries overseas in their loyalties. There are also certain recent historical events that have exercised a powerful influence. The circumstances of the end of the

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1. The greater part of this article was originally presented as a paper in a seminar on Commonwealth Relations at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London.
2. Except for two short periods in 1959, during one of which Dato Ismail bin Dato Abdul Rahman served as Foreign Minister, and during another Tun Abdul Razak served as Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman has held the Premiership and the post of Minister for Foreign Affairs since Malaya became independent in 1957.

war, which gave communist guerrillas temporary control of large parts of the country, and the outbreaks of inter-communal violence at the time; the consequent hostility of most of the Malays to communism; and the fact that when in June 1946, the Malay Nationalist Party, with its Greater Indonesia leanings split from the United Malays National Organisation, Dato Onn was able to win over most of the Malays to the latter — all these facts influenced Malaya's subsequent alignment.

We must recall also that the transition to self-government, though rapid, was smooth. The new Malayan diplomats were trained in the United Kingdom, and the previous organisation of Malaya's external relations may have had more of a positive than a negative influence on their thinking. Immediately after the War, British relations with Southeast Asia were handled by a Special Commissioner in Singapore, Lord Killearn; imperial affairs were handled by a Governor General, Malcolm Macdonald. Later the two offices were merged, and for some years Malcolm Macdonald, as Commissioner General, handled both tasks.

The regional task involved many official conferences in Singapore and social contacts in Johore with diplomats from Indonesia and the small neighbouring countries: Burma, Viet Nam, Thailand, etc. It is impossible to say how far these contributed to the sense that the neighbouring small countries were Malaya's natural allies and that Malaya was a natural centre. There is little real evidence of contiguity; but the regional emphasis, and the recent moves towards a wider Malaysian Federation both follow the lines indicated in Malcolm Macdonald's time — an emphasis on Southeast Asia as a separate region, and a rather closer contact, within that region, of the countries of British influence.

One of the difficulties which the regional policy has always encountered is that of the alignments of the different countries on the communist issue. All of the countries concerned are non-communist, and all the governments are pretty well aware that they are in greater danger of losing their independence through communist control than in any other way. But they differ profoundly in their methods of dealing with this situation.

This is no place to discuss Southeast Asian neutralism in detail.<sup>3</sup> But some consideration of the background is essential. First, we must remember that national independence is the paramount interest; democratic government is secondary, while free enterprise, because

3. Cf. *Towards a Malayan Nation* by T. H. Silcock, Singapore, Eastern Universities Press, 1961, Chapter 7 for some discussion of this question.

of the colonial legacy, is a political liability. Opposition to communism is primarily opposition to indirect foreign rule, and only secondarily opposition to dictatorship as such, while capitalism, even if it is supported, is recognised as difficult to defend. Next, active fear of domination by foreign capitalist powers is by no means dead even among the politically sophisticated. An Asian could be forgiven for mistaking Taiwan or even Thailand today for a country in the early stages of indirect foreign rule. More important is the fact that this fear is deep and genuine among the politically naive, and is an excellent political weapon. The primacy of national independence and the fear of the capitalist powers favour a policy of neutralism in the cold war, combined with attempts to combat communism internally. Small Southeast Asian countries feel as confident as many larger countries elsewhere that direct military intervention by either side would be prevented by the other, even in a neutralist country.

The extent to which neutralism in external affairs inhibits anti-communist action and anti-communist propaganda at home varies from country to country. But in several other Southeast Asian countries an open anti-communist stand externally would impose much greater internal handicaps than in Malaya.

Clearly the Alliance feels reasonably secure internally in pursuing an openly anti-communist line. Externally its position has been rather more ambiguous. One of its chief aims is still to secure a regional grouping of the Southeast Asian countries themselves. Joint action with Thailand, the Philippines and South Viet Nam should not be such as to exclude Indonesia, and preferably Burma too, from joining in. The same desire for a purely regional grouping also influences Malaya's attitude to SEATO. Yet the Tunku does not call Malaya neutralist, and would not wish to join a neutralist bloc extending outside Southeast Asia, any more than a SEATO alliance.

Internal political factors also have a bearing on foreign policy, since the Tunku has to maintain the cohesion of the Alliance and its hold over the country. He would like to keep differences with Indonesia to a minimum, so as not to alienate unnecessarily any of the vital Malay support on which the Alliance's electoral power largely depends. This situation would, of course, have been much worse if the Malay Nationalist Party had not broken away, and been largely discredited during the Emergency. The influence of the Chinese and Indians in Malaya is less; but any action — like joining SEATO — which would annoy both simultaneously, would probably be taken only with great reluctance.

So much for the hand. How has it been played in the four years since independence? There have been relatively few public statements on foreign policy. The king's speech each year gives little guidance. Most of the evidence we have concerning foreign policy is found in the Tunku's public statements while abroad on his numerous tours, and the positions taken by the Malayan delegations at the United Nations meetings.

We can consider the working out of Malayan foreign policy under five headings: Commonwealth, United Nations, regional policy, military policy, and boundary problems.

One striking feature of Malaya's interpretation of the Commonwealth is that it contains no strong emphasis on the complete autonomy of each of the member states. No doubt a fair measure of autonomy is taken for granted but the Tunku has shown no disposition to emphasise 101 per cent national sovereignty. Perhaps a small state feels that its status is raised by being a member on equal terms with larger states, and is therefore more ready to suggest decisions by a majority vote. However this may be, the Tunku has made it plain that his concept of the Commonwealth is that it ought to be an organisation with some power to influence the internal affairs of its members, at least on certain important issues, by a majority vote.

The Tunku's initiatives in Commonwealth matters have, admittedly, all been concerned with South African apartheid. We cannot be sure that he had faced the implications for Malaya, e.g. possible Commonwealth intervention in Malaya's Press laws or citizenship laws. But it is probable that what he hoped for was a spirit of moderation and compromise within this framework. His suggestion to Mr Louw, apparently made informally at the 1960 Prime Ministers' Conference, and subsequently given to the Press,<sup>4</sup> that ten African representatives in the South African parliament would satisfy him, was no doubt meant as a gesture of moderation and certainly involved some courage on his part in prevailing conditions of Afro-Asian opinion. Similarly his unwillingness — as representing a small nation — to take the initiative in actually expelling South Africa, shows a similar temperament. Commonwealth support for broadly democratic principles within Malaya is probably welcomed from a conviction that it will be tactfully given.

Malaya's moderation over the currency situation is also noteworthy here. Shortly after the second world war there was a good deal of ill feeling in Malaya against exchange control, which was handicapping Malayan reconstruction, especially in the tin industry, al-

4. Cf. *The Guardian*, 14.6.60; *The Times*, 21.6.60.

though Malaya was one of the sterling area's chief dollar earners. There were suggestions in several quarters that an independent Malaya would leave the sterling area. After independence Malaya was unable, for local reasons, to give its new Central Bank immediate control of the issue of currency.<sup>5</sup> It was under pressure to make at least some gesture, but contented itself with building up a token reserve of dollars outside the London pool.

In the United Nations Malaya has normally taken the usual Afro-Asian stand against colonialism, generally favouring the more moderate resolutions when opinion was divided. In 1957 it attracted some criticism by abstaining on a vote on Indonesia and Western New Guinea.<sup>6</sup> This is an issue on which Malaya perhaps felt it had to be careful not to go beyond condemning continued Dutch rule. Subsequent events in Borneo and in the development of Malaya's relations with Australia have indicated why it could not recognise Indonesian claims in full. The Tunku did, however, try hard to mediate in this issue. After sounding out Indonesian opinion he tried to secure American support for a plan which has not been revealed in detail, but which involved some United Nations intervention and no explicit recognition of Indonesian sovereignty in advance. Apparently he secured some American support and probably some concession from Holland, but not enough to interest Indonesia.

Malaya has sent over 700 troops, many of them experienced combat troops to the Congo; it played an active role in the ill-fated conciliation commission of the United Nations.

Its policy towards China is interesting. The following initiatives have been taken: (a) an announcement that Malaya would not itself exchange diplomatic representatives with either mainland China or Taiwan;<sup>7</sup> (b) a joint resolution with Ireland condemning Chinese action in Tibet;<sup>8</sup> (c) active attempts to persuade the U.S.A. to work for the admission of both mainland China and Taiwan to the U.N.<sup>9</sup> The policy on recognition is plainly a compromise intended for its internal effect. The attitude to Tibet shows an unwillingness to make any exception in favour of 'cold-war issues' — i.e. matters that might annoy the U.S.S.R. — in its condemnation of colonialism.

Mention should also be made of Malaya's economic policy, mainly

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5. Cf. P. W. Sherwood, 'The Watson Caine Report on the Establishment of a Central Bank in Malaya', *Malayan Economic Review*, April 1957.

6. Cf. *The Times*, 5.2.58; 11.2.58 'A Common Enemy' and letter by Md. Sopic.

7. Cf. *The Times*, 13.12.58 'Malaya Hesitates'.

8. United Nations General Assembly, 14th Session, September 1959.

9. I.e. during the Tunku's American Tour, 1960.

at the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East. This is generally a policy first of making bilateral investment agreements<sup>10</sup> and trying to negotiate a multilateral investment charter<sup>11</sup>, to safeguard investment subject to suitable conditions of training of local personnel; of pressing continuously for international control of raw material prices, as a measure against instability; and of opposing trade groupings and tariffs against underdeveloped countries generally, so as to maintain its potential export markets. Malaya is an openly capitalist country, though most of its own nationalists are linked with socialist parties in their home countries.

There has been a good deal of clumsiness in Malaya's handling of its regional policy. The aim has been quite clear — perhaps too clear — from the beginning. Having starved the world's press of any real statements on foreign policy and refused a debate in the Assembly on the ground that Malaya had no foreign policy<sup>12</sup>, the Tunku made his first state visit to South Viet Nam at the beginning of 1958. He does not appear to have been adequately aware of the effect that this visit — and his statements of solidarity with President Ngo Dinh Diem — would create in the neutralist Southeast Asian countries. Particularly unfortunate was an interview with the Chief of Staff, Le Van Thy, in which he regretted that several Southeast Asian countries had not taken a definite stand against communism, and hoped that by working together 'we may be able to win them over to the free world'.<sup>13</sup>

The trouble with all this is *not* that one is setting the trap in the presence of the mouse. The matter is subtler than that. Indonesia and Burma are quite as aware as Malaya of the communist danger, and quite as interested in meeting it. It is more nearly a matter of the conventions of public debate. In Indonesia and Burma, as in Singapore, one does not expose oneself to charges of witch-hunting, neo-colonialism, and the like, but tries to outbid and outwit the local communists. One therefore cannot publicly co-operate with someone who has publicly announced such an aim as 'winning them over to the free world'.

After pausing in Thailand to try to associate the Thais in this co-operation, the Tunku went on to Ceylon to the tenth anniversary celebrations. Here, again, he was in sympathy with his hosts. 'The

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10. E.g. with West Germany, Japan, U.S.A.

11. Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, Kuala Lumpur Session, March 1958.

12. Cf. *Straits Times*, 26.11.57, 'Tunku: No Foreign Affairs Debate'.

13. Cf. *Straits Times*, 29.1.58, 'Must Win them Over'.

danger as I see it is that the Southeast Asian nations are inclined to dance to the tune of the bigger nations . . . It is, I think, a mistake for these nations to concern themselves unduly with world politics or African-Asian politics, when politics in Southeast Asia are in the melting pot.<sup>14</sup> But foreign policy statements are apt to be quoted abroad.

First an open invitation to attacks from Indonesia's left wing press, now a pebble carelessly thrown at the idols of Bandung. No wonder the Indonesian foreign minister had to postpone his visit to Kuala Lumpur and delay signing a pact with Malaya!

At Colombo also the Tunku said he would welcome a meeting of Southeast Asian leaders in Kuala Lumpur, but thought — characteristically — that this would be presumptuous in the leader of a small nation. Again, two months later, in the presence of an Indian journalist<sup>15</sup>, he was toying with the idea of inviting Southeast Asian countries (Malaya, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Viet Nam) to a conference on a defence pact outside SEATO, including no western country.

Apparently the Philippines were equally badly briefed on Southeast Asian neutralist psychology. After a visit by the Tunku to Manila, at which a treaty of friendship among the Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, was discussed, a Philippine Government spokesman suggested that later Korea might be associated with it. Both the Tunku and President Garcia like to stress their racial ties with Indonesia; but Indonesia remains unmoved.

The character of the grouping has been steadily demilitarised to give more chance of other Southeast Asian countries adhering. First it was SEAFET, the Southeast Asian Friendship and Economic Treaty. That was too like SEATO. Next it was ASAS, the Association of Southeast Asian States, later shortened, for local linguistic reasons to ASA; but neither Indonesia nor Burma was tempted.

Indeed the future of ASA itself seems doubtful. Thailand and Malaya are still actively interested, and even the Philippines has apparently been surprised that its attempt to wreck Malaysia by the curious claim to North Borneo has strained relations with Malaya. From Malaya's point of view there is no question that the achievement of Malaysia would now take precedence over continued

14. Cf. *New York Times*, 9.2.58.

15. Cf. *Straits Times*, 21.4.58, 'Tunku Plans New Asian Alliance'.

attempts to build up ASA. Perhaps only a strong initiative from Thailand could now save the Association.

Military policy is a matter of the alliance with the United Kingdom and the presence of Australian troops; SEATO; and the Singapore base.

The alliance with the United Kingdom was negotiated as part of the achievement of independence. It was at first needed mainly for strengthening the government against the communist terrorists. Since the end of the Emergency it has been defended as necessary while Malaya builds up its own forces. The present government of Malaya certainly values this alliance, as part of its protection against the internal and external dangers of communist violence. The Brunei revolt and 'confrontation' by Indonesia have again emphasised Malaya's military weakness. Since the end of the Emergency the alliance is politically more vulnerable. It is of some interest that the presence of Australian troops has been at least as vigorously attacked as that of British troops. The reason for this deserves some further analysis.

Clearly the frequent attacks by politicians on the presence of Australian troops give the lie to any superficial explanation, such as that Malaysians have no fear of communist attack and resent the presence of foreign troops, in the way that Australians might resent the presence of Americans if they felt secure. If this were the explanation, British troops, as a reminder of Colonial rule, would be much more sharply resented.

The attacks are plainly communist-inspired, though in most cases a non-communist has been stimulated to express them. Their objective is to weaken Malaya's military defence against communism, and its diplomatic standing among neutralist or non-committed states. The technique which is used is the one which has become familiar to any serious student of communist documents: finding a genuine grievance; taking the lead in working it up into a situation of conflict, and preventing any solution based on genuine compromise; and using communist leadership in the conflict to switch the emotions aroused into actions which will further a secret objective.

This is merely basic analysis. The interesting questions are what ill-feeling is there to exploit, and what secret objective is served by exploiting it. There is almost certainly less natural and unprompted ill-feeling against Australians than against Englishmen. English slights based on colour-prejudice must obviously be much commoner than Australian ones, if only because there have been many more Englishmen in Malaya. Resentment against Australians arises



mainly from political factors, such as Australian colour-discrimination in immigration policy and United Nations criticisms of Australia's role in New Guinea<sup>16</sup>; no doubt it is real enough, but not very intense.

From a communist point of view it is worth stimulating because it has more chance of affecting action. British public opinion has had a great deal of experience of communist manipulation of nationalist feelings in Asia and Africa. It is neither willing to swallow extreme right-wing attacks on all such nationalism because communists exploit it, nor is it an easy victim for communist slogans. In Australia, interest in Asia is newer, and it may well seem to the communists that they have an easier task in trying to win progressive opinion to the communist line, by giving all the prominence they can to the view that the thing which most alienates Asian opinion is support of any Government action against communism.

Malaya's unwillingness to join SEATO, or admit involvement indirectly in SEATO obligations<sup>17</sup> is puzzling at least to American opinion, in view of Malaya's refusal itself to take a neutralist position about international communism.<sup>18</sup> It was at first simply assumed that Malaya would, after independence, apply to join SEATO, in which it had been involved as a British dependency since 1954. Walter Nash of New Zealand, visiting Malaya for the 1958 ECAFE Conference, expressed a hope, amounting to an assumption, that this application would be made. This remark may well have been the cause of the refusal. Participation involved difficulties, both internal and external. Internally it would alienate many Chinese and Indians, and some Malays with Indonesian sympathies. Externally it would weaken the regional co-operation of all Southeast Asian states which is a major object of Malayan foreign policy. Nevertheless Malaya might have joined if the issue had been left until a suitable occasion. Forced to comment, the Tunku said that no application would be made. Later this was made part of the (rather vague) suggestion of a Southeast Asian defence agreement and this has effectively shut Malaya out. The Singapore base has come up as an issue only under the

16. K. G. Tregonning, *Australia's Imperialist Image in Southeast Asia*, *Australian Quarterly*, 33, iii, Sept. 1961.

17. Malaya frequently denies Soviet and Chinese propaganda that it is indirectly or secretly allied with SEATO. Yet in a reply to K. V. Thaver in the *Foreign Affairs Debate*, 11.12.58, the Tunku said Malaya was 'in a way indirectly connected with SEATO'.

18. Cf. *Sunday Times*, Singapore, 7.12.58, quotes the Tunku as saying 'Let me tell you that there are no such things as local Communists. Communism is an international organisation which aims for world domination'.

Malaysia plan. Hitherto it had been a fairly important part of SEATO. In preparation for the Singapore referendum on Malaysia, the Singapore Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, committed himself to sovereignty over the base passing from Britain to Malaysia, with any British use of it being by agreement only. Such agreement, satisfactory to both parties (if not to Lee Kuan Yew), has apparently been secured. The Tunku, under pressure, has revealed in Parliament that Britain cannot use the base without consulting the Malaysian Government, but need not — if agreement cannot be reached — accept the Malaysian point of view.

Finally we must consider boundary problems, which are inevitably a part of any foreign policy. The main boundary problems relate to the proposed Federation of Malaysia, but there are minor issues even without this major change.

In the north the four northern Malay states were under Siamese control up to 1909, and were given back to the Thais by the Japanese; on the other hand several of the southern provinces of Thailand have populations with substantial majorities of Muslim Malay-speaking people, some of whom would prefer to belong to Malaya now that it is independent. Occasional propaganda is issued on both sides of the border in favour of change, but it seems unlikely to become serious, unless relations worsen on other grounds.

On the whole the Thais probably feel the greater sense of grievance, since their claim is based on actual ownership in quite recent times, while Malaya's claim could rest only on language and religion.

It is conceivable that Malaysia could subtly affect even this issue. From time to time Thailand threatens to cut a canal through the Isthmus of Kra. This threatens mainly the trade of Singapore. A Federation which relied heavily on Singapore's revenue might possibly become more interested in excluding this possibility; but this would involve claims on Thailand going well beyond anything usually suggested. This issue will probably not be activated in the foreseeable future.

In the south, while there is no actual territorial dispute apart from those involved in Malaysia, the Federation of Malaya and Singapore are involved in some difficulties with Indonesia as a result of the fact that Malaya is a peninsula jutting out into an archipelago which Indonesia would like to claim as its own. For Indonesia, perhaps more than the other archipelago nations, feels strongly about the waters lying within the borders of its islands. The Indonesians' expression for their country, *tanah air kita* — our lands and waters — specifically claims the water as well as the land. This

means that some of the inevitable disputes over fishing and smuggling are always in danger of developing territorial overtones. The development of a Malaysian Federation will of course aggravate these problems.

Indonesia has shown marked hostility to the proposal to federate the three territories in North Borneo under British protection with the Federation of Malaya and Singapore. Though the Brunei revolt was probably a local initiative, and may not at first have received aid from the Indonesian Government, it has plainly had private Indonesian aid and official diplomatic support. After the revolt failed Indonesia repeatedly threatened to send in 'volunteers'. Even Indonesia, however, is unlikely to involve itself deliberately in war with Great Britain, and could hardly intervene effectively without doing so.

Indonesian opposition has clearly strengthened Malayan determination to carry Malaysia through. The United Malays' National Organisation has indicated that if 'incidents' do occur one reaction in Malaya will be to give active aid and support to separatist movements in the Indonesian Outer Provinces.

Strong support in 1958 for the Indonesian rebels in Sumatra and elsewhere could have had serious consequences for Indonesia, but the situation in 1963 may be less favourable. It is interesting that suggestions were publicly canvassed in 1958 that Sumatra might be encouraged to federate with Malaya<sup>19</sup>, but Malaya at that time was anxious to maintain good relations with its southern neighbour.

A more surprising consequence of the Malaysia proposals is the Philippine claim to North Borneo, and the increasing hostility between the Philippines and Malaya.

It is not, of course, strange that American research should discover possible ambiguities of meaning in a document drawn up between Europeans and the Sultan of Sulu in the late nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> This could hardly surprise anyone who has tried to translate Malay texts into exact Western phrases, or has encountered at first hand the desire of American research workers to find, within their field, some hitherto unexplored facet of colonial wickedness.

19. *The Times*, 10.2.58. 'Many people suggest that Malaya should be the cornerstone of a federation which would include British Borneo and Sumatra . . . but the Government of Malaya is not looking so far ahead.'

20. R. H. Fifield, *The Diplomacy of Southeast Asia 1945-58*. N.Y., Harper, 1958.

21. The Spanish and American Governments accepted the fact of British rule, and the Constitution of the Philippines itself accepted the boundary, though the Philippine Government resented the change in the status of the territory to a Crown Colony.

No one was in any doubt at the time about what had actually happened.<sup>21</sup> The boundary has been clear for three-quarters of a century, and in all that time there has been no ruler but the Chartered Company and then the Colonial Government.<sup>22</sup> For a quarter of a century there has not even been a Sultan of Sulu.

What is strange is that the Philippines should feel it has anything to gain by pressing this claim — apparently based, if it has any basis at all, on possible mistranslation of one Malay word — at a time when even success would bring acute internal and external embarrassments, and the much more probable failure will endanger its relations with its two best Asian friends and with the United States and the United Kingdom which both support Malaysia.

The attitude in Malaya has been one of complete bewilderment. The Philippine claim has at no time been taken seriously; but Philippine hostility to Malaysia, and the foundering of ASA on this rock which seemed so completely trivial in its origins, has been probably the greatest of all the setbacks which Malayan policy has experienced.

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22. K. G. Tregonning, 'The Claim for North Borneo by the Philippines', *Australian Outlook*, 16, iii, December 1962.