

***KONFRONTASI* AND THE MAKING OF MALAYSIA:  
BRITISH RESPONSES**

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The speech given by Tunku Abdul Rahman on May 1961 is often seen as the turning point in the formation of Malaysia. The Tunku's idea of Malaysia dovetailed with the British "Grand Design" for the decolonization of their remaining colonial possessions in Southeast Asia. This set off a chain of events, which culminated in the formation of Malaysia in September 1963. In fact, the major details on Malaysia were supposedly worked out by December 1962, and 31 August 1963 was fixed as the date for Malaysia Day.

When the idea of Malaysia was first proposed, it drew lukewarm response from Indonesia. In fact, Indonesia initially welcomed the idea, as noted in a speech given by its foreign minister, Dr. Subandrio at the United Nations in November 1961.<sup>1</sup> This initial support transformed into hostility and finally *Konfrontasi* by 1963.

In retrospect, *Konfrontasi* did not stop the formation of Malaysia. However, documents from the Public Records Office (PRO) and the Australian Archives reveal concern on the part of the British (and even Malaya) that the whole Malaysia project could potentially be called off. The British on their part feared that *Konfrontasi* might frustrate their "grand design" to decolonise in the Borneo territories. Also, fears of *Konfrontasi* escalating into a hot war forced the British to maintain and even increase their military presence in the region, leading to further accusations of Malaysia being a neo-colonialist plot.

The expressed objective of the first phase of *Konfrontasi* was to stop the formation of Malaysia until the wishes of the Borneo residents were ascertained in a UN supervised plebiscite. While Indonesia failed to prevent the formation of Malaysia, it managed to "internationalize" the Malaysia issue and thereby threaten to abort the plan. The role and responses of the British in this episode had significant impact on the outcome of the events.

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<sup>1</sup> John David Legge, *Sukarno: A Political Biography* (London: Penguin, 1972), pp. 361, 362.

A survey of the historiography of *Konfrontasi* reveals a proliferation of works on the topic. However focuses mainly on the motive and causes behind *Konfrontasi*. The reasons have aptly been categorised by Mackie as "expansionist, diversionist, or ideological".<sup>2</sup> The de-classification of Australian documents in recent years has led to excellent official histories on the involvement of Australia in the conflict. In contrast, the role of the British in *Konfrontasi* has been largely neglected until recently.<sup>3</sup> Works touching on the role of the British during *Konfrontasi* tend to focus on security interests.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the conventional view was that the British response to *Konfrontasi* was primarily a military one, since it was successful in thwarting the military threat posed by Indonesia throughout the course of *Konfrontasi*.

As mentioned hitherto, the British intended the establishment of Malaysia to be uneventful. With the ending of the Emergency by 1960, there was no indication of hostilities, especially with the cautious welcome of the Malaysia proposal by Indonesia. Nonetheless, by mid-1962, suspicion of Indonesian designs on the Borneo Territories was mentioned in the British Cabinet. However, it was felt that "Indonesia's claim to New Guinea" and "political disunity" made such designs at best a remote possibility.<sup>5</sup>

Signs of possible conflict emerged by September 1962 with censorious remarks made by Dr. Ali Sastroamidjojo, Chairman of the PNI, on the Malaysia proposal. He stated that "Indonesia would not remain indifferent to the formation of Malaysia" and alleged that

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<sup>2</sup> J.A.C. Mackie, *Konfrontasi: The Indonesia-Malaysia Dispute 1963-1966* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 326.

<sup>3</sup> One key work on the role of the British in *Konfrontasi* that is published in recent years would be Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia, 1961-1965: Britain, United States and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Archana Sharma, *British Policy Towards Malaysia, 1957-1967*, (London : Sangam Books, 1993); Chin Kin Wah, *The Defence of Malaysia and Singapore: The transformation of a security system, 1957-1971*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Greg Poulgrain, *The Genesis of Konfrontasi*; Wong Chee Wai, "British Strategy during the Indonesian Confrontation".

<sup>5</sup> CAB 134/1951, Report by Cabinet Committee on Greater Malaysia, Appendix B, 10 Jul 1962.

foreign military bases might be set up in Borneo.<sup>6</sup> This drew strong reactions from the Tunku, who curtly remarked, "Everyone is free to follow developments in Malaysia but I must categorically say, keep your hands off our affairs".<sup>7</sup> Dr. Subandrio, Indonesia's Foreign Minister, heightened tensions by his statements to *The Straits Times* to the effect that Indonesia would take counter actions if a military base (especially United States) was established in Borneo: "If it is an American base... we shall then arrange for a Soviet base in our part of Borneo".<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to the Tunku, the British dismissed the Indonesian statements as mere rhetoric. Sir Leslie Fry, the British Ambassador to Indonesia, regarded Dr. Sastroamidjojo as "cut[ting] little political ice" and expressed puzzlement over the Tunku's strong reactions.<sup>9</sup> In any case, the British felt that Dr. Sastroamidjojo's remarks were moderate, making the Tunku's reactions "rather provocative" to the Indonesians in comparison.<sup>10</sup> Concerning Subandrio's statements, the Foreign office believed that *The Straits Times* had "seriously misrepresented" them.<sup>11</sup>

Fortunately for both Malaya and the British, the incident was shortlived. But signs of divergence between the Tunku and the British were already evident. The above account also suggests that the British were already active diplomatically even before the Brunei revolt, to ensure that there was no external opposition to the formation of Malaysia.

The conventional view was that the British response to *Konfrontasi* was primarily a military one is at variance to the British actions prior to and following the onset of *Konfrontasi*. Even before the Brunei Revolt of 1962, the British were active

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<sup>6</sup> DO 169/237, Telegram no. 711, From Geoffrey Tory, UK High Commissioner to Kuala Lumpur to Commonwealth Relations Office, 25 Sept 1962; DO 169/237, Telegram no. 629, From Sir Leslie Fry, UK Ambassador to Jakarta to Foreign Office, 28 Sept 1962.

<sup>7</sup> DO 169/237, Telegram no. 711, From Tory to Commonwealth Relations Office, 25 Sept 1962.

<sup>8</sup> *The Straits Times*, 28 Sept 1962.

<sup>9</sup> DO 169/237, Telegram no. 630, From Fry to Foreign Office, 28 Sept 1962.

<sup>10</sup> DO 169/237, Letter from Jenkins to Bentliff, Oct 1962; DO 169/237, Letter from Peterson to Cable, 3 Oct 1962.

diplomatically. British Intelligence had alerted Whitehall that Indonesia was opposed to the Malaysia plan, and had designs on the Borneo territories. Thus, they tried to restrain the Tunku from making remarks, which were seen as censorious to Indonesia. The reason behind the British actions was to ensure that there would be no open declaration of opposition to the Malaysia scheme. The British did not want the Indonesians to have an excuse to declare their opposition in public.

The Brunei Revolt provided ample sparks for Indonesia to declare publicly its opposition to Malaysia, citing the excuse that the Malaysia plan did not have the support of the peoples of Borneo. That the revolt was successfully quelled by the British added fuel to the Indonesian charge. Thus, the aftermath of the revolt saw a flurry of British diplomatic actions aimed at dousing the flames the revolt generated. While they suspected Indonesian complicity in the revolt, the British were anxious to diffuse tensions between Indonesia and Malaya, thereby stopping Indonesia from making a public declaration of its opposition to Malaysia. In this, the British were frustrated by the war of words between the Tunku and Sukarno, which served eventually to impede British diplomatic efforts in preventing the onset of *Konfrontasi*.<sup>12</sup> This is at variance with Poulgrain's thesis, which argues that the British had a hand in instigating *Konfrontasi* to serve their interests.<sup>13</sup>

The British were actively mediating between the Tunku and Indonesia in the revolt's aftermath, which contrasted with the war of words between Tunku, Subandrio and Sukarno. Nonetheless, the British were able to play a part in putting the flames under control until end 1962. The person largely responsible was Sir Leslie Fry, the British Ambassador to Indonesia. The year 1962 thus ended with the easing of tensions between

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<sup>11</sup> CRSA 1209/85 1963/6637 Part 1, From Australian High Commission, London to The Dept of External Affairs.

<sup>12</sup> See Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia*, pp. 107-130.

<sup>13</sup> See Greg Poulgrain, *The Genesis of Konfrontasi: Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia, 1945-1965* (Bathurst: Crawford House, 1998).

Indonesia and Malaya. This was in no small part facilitated by the British in their mediation efforts.<sup>14</sup>

The Tunku's New Year message was thus a bombshell to the British, for it contained remarks that were inflammatory to Indonesia:

Malaya achieved independence under stress of Communist insurrection and "birth of Malaysia" under similar conditions will not deter us from going ahead with it... Referring to Brunei, the Tunku said that "certain political parties in Indonesia" were opposed to Malaysia and "were determined to smother it"... revolt in Brunei was...essentially bid for power by one man over three Borneo territories *with encouragement from Indonesia*.<sup>15</sup>

This was tantamount to accusing Indonesia of open support to Azahari in the Brunei revolt, something about which the British did not have sufficient evidence even at that time. The Tunku continued his tirade against Indonesia in his address to the UNMO party meeting at Penang on 1 January, "So far Indonesia has been attacking us with words. So long as words are used against us we will return compliments in full measure. But if it comes to hot war in which guns and bullets are used we are helpless".<sup>16</sup> While Lee Kuan Yew, the Prime Minister of Singapore regarded the above statement as an admission of weakness, the British were concerned that the Tunku's public statements would be provocative to Indonesia, and therefore urged restraint.<sup>17</sup>

Tunku's remarks re-ignited the war of words between Malaya and Indonesia, as seen in Sukarno's and Subandrio's speeches on 16 and 17 January respectively.<sup>18</sup> Again, the British attempted to mediate by summoning Diah, the Indonesian Ambassador to the United Kingdom.<sup>19</sup> Even so, the British were unable this time to prevent Indonesia's public declaration of opposition to Malaysia. The Tunku's statements made in January thus

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<sup>14</sup> Thus, the outbursts by Sukarno and the Tunku in the midst of the lull in acrimonies had limited impact. See CO 1030/1013, telegram no. 992 Presse, from Tory to CRO, 27 December 1962 and CO 1030/1013, telegram no. 818, from Fry to Foreign Office, 28 December 1962.

<sup>15</sup> A 1209/85 1963/6637 Part 1, from Australian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur to the Department of External Affairs, 2 January 1963. Emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> DO 169/237, telegram no. 7, from Tory to CRO, 3 January 1963.

<sup>17</sup> DO 169/237, telegram no. 13, from Selkirk to the Sandys, 5 January 1963; DO 169/237, telegram no. 5, from Sandys to Selkirk, 3 January 1963.

<sup>18</sup> DO 169/237, telegram no. 45, from Fry to Foreign Office, 17 January 1963; DO 169/237, from Selby to Cable

provided the final impetus for the public pronouncement of Indonesia's opposition to the Malaysia plan, or *Konfrontasi*. On 20 January 1963, Dr. Subandrio announced *Konfrontasi* against the Malaysia plan.

With the commencement of *Konfrontasi*, the British had to undertake a military response. The British initially adopted a "wait and see" approach, discounting the possibility of an immediate military threat. This contrasted with the Tunku's assessments. Thus, the 72-hour alert of Commonwealth Strategic Reserve as a precautionary measure was more to allay the Tunku's fears, than to meet an actual threat posed by Indonesia. Throughout 1963, there was little military action except for sporadic incursions, which were dealt relatively easily by the British forces in Borneo under the command of General Walter Walker. This was a testimony to the success and effectiveness of the British military presence.

The British diplomatic response, however, was not as successful. The limited success in their diplomacy towards *Konfrontasi* contributed to the assumption that the British response to *Konfrontasi* was mainly military. In reality, the British were very active diplomatically, albeit in a covert fashion. This came in the form of diplomatic representations to the Indonesian leaders, as well as requesting the good offices of countries with close ties with Indonesia, such as the United States, Australia and India. The unfolding of events and the attitude of the Tunku and Sukarno towards the British made them realise the impotency of their diplomatic efforts.

At first, the British acted as though they were 'in control' of the events, and as the 'shaper' of events. However, with the unfolding of events, the British realized how limited their political influence was in the region. This was best manifested in the Manila meetings, where they had been excluded. Thus, from a supposed 'driver' seat, the British awoke to the reality that they were merely concerned passengers. That they were

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<sup>19</sup> DO 169/237, from Foreign Office to Fry, 15 January 1963.

concerned with the events can be seen from the amount of correspondence between the Ambassadors and London on what went on in Indonesia throughout the period of *Konfrontasi*.

Throughout the first nine months of *Konfrontasi*, the British were constantly irritated by the shifting stands of both the Tunku and Sukarno. According to Lee Kuan Yew, the Tunku was acting out of his fear of Sukarno.<sup>20</sup> The Tunku was also constrained by the domestic politics of Malaya, in that he needed to demonstrate that he was ready to defend the territorial interests of Malaya. The mutual dislike between the Tunku and Sukarno further influenced their respective actions. Sukarno was even more bound by domestic forces than the Tunku, having to balance between the divisive forces of the Army and the PKI. Thus, the attitudes and responses of the Tunku and Sukarno played a large part in limiting the success and effectiveness of British diplomatic response vis-a-vis their military response to *Konfrontasi*.

In the end, *Konfrontasi* did not impede the formation of Malaysia. However, it did mark the success of Indonesia in “internationalizing” the issue of Malaysia and the British failure in making this a “low key” internal affair. It also presented to the British a rude reminder of their limited political influence in shaping the future of the region. British responses to *Konfrontasi* were inexorably linked to the desire to see the fruition of the Malaysia plan. The common perception was that it was primarily military. It has been shown that this was not the case. The British response to *Konfrontasi* was in fact primarily diplomatic, although its apparent successes were chiefly military.

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<sup>20</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 1998), pp. 493, 494.