

# 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 Killern; 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, 1963. 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. Sopicc.

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.