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# The sweeping saga behind Malaysia's troubled birth

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**ACTS OF AGGRESSION:** Indonesia condemned the Malaysia merger proposal as sinister

**A**N underlying reason for forming an enlarged Malaysian Federation was that this would enhance stability, security and peace in the region. Based on the recommendations of the Cobbold Commission, set up to ascertain the wishes of the people of North Borneo (Sabah) and Sarawak on the merger proposal, it was clear to most quarters that the formation of Malaysia was desirable. Ironically, however, as events unfolded, the newborn nation underwent a troubled birth. The proclamation of Malaysia on Sept 16, 1963 was greeted in Jakarta with mob violence. Both the Malaysian and British embassies were attacked by rioters. Indonesia refused outright to recognise Malaysia that led to the withdrawal of diplomatic and consular representation by both countries. Thus, its formation spawned grave challenges to the Federation of Malaysia.



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In the initial stages of the Malaysia merger proposal, there was no serious opposition, let alone real objections regionally as well as internationally, but for some moderate criticism from leading communist countries, particularly communist China. However, no sooner was the merger proposal announced to the world than Indonesia launched its Konfrontasi (Confrontation) against its formation. President Soekarno openly declared hostility against the larger political merger and unleashed his Ganyang Malaysia or Crush Malaysia campaign. The Indonesian government vociferously condemned the Malaysia merger proposal as a sinister neo-colonialist plot to undermine Indonesia.

British military bases located in the constituent territories and the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) of 1957 were denounced as direct threats to Indonesia. Going by Malaya's rather modest military capability that was insignificant in comparison with Indonesia's military might, it was obvious that the latter's contention was unfounded, to say the least. As for AMDA, the operative clause clearly limited Britain's role to defend Malaya against any threat of external aggression. Be that as it may, Indonesia did not relent in its vehement attacks against the Malaysia Federation.

Political analysts and international relations experts have offered various reasons for Indonesia's sudden outburst of hostility towards the formation of Malaysia. They may be summed up as a complex web of ideological, political and economic factors, ranging from critical domestic political compulsions confronting Soekarno to a serious misconception on the part of Indonesian leaders of the Malaysia Federation.

I believe that Indonesia's pique over Malaya's insensitivity to its leadership status and role as the largest and most powerful nation in the region coupled with the "Big Brother" psyche in the mindset of Indonesian leaders were major factors. Rightly or wrongly, Soekarno and a good number of Indonesian leaders especially from the Parti Komunis Indonesia (PKI) felt that the country's standing as the pre-eminent power in the Malay Archipelago was being seriously undermined by Malaya working in cohort with Britain and its Western allies.

Indonesia legitimised Konfrontasi on the grounds that the



**Tun Ghazali Shafie** (left) was specially tasked by then prime minister **Tunku Abdul Rahman** to become **Malaya's point-man** in the Malaysia merger negotiations.

Malaysia Federation was not an indigenous initiative, but an imperialist neocolonialist plot to counterweigh Indonesia's dominance in the region.

The coinage, neocolonialism, was taken to mean the granting of a sort of independence with the intention of making the liberated country a client-state and the colonial power continuing to control it by non-political means.

Significantly, an important element of Indonesian's justification for declaring Konfrontasi was the belief that Malaya itself was a semi-independent feudalistic anachronism that is anathema to their political vision of Indonesia Raya or Greater Indonesia as envisioned in the Indonesian concept of Nusantara.

From the perspective of Malayan leaders, Konfrontasi was viewed as a plot hatched by the PKI for expanding communist influence through the emerging Jakarta-Beijing-Hanoi-Pyongyang axis.

Indonesia's acts of Konfrontasi initially were economic in nature such as its total blockade of bilateral trade and travel. These became progressively intense, even bellicose, after Malaysia's formation was declared formally. In-

donesian military pressure manifested in its aggressive naval patrol of the Straits of Malacca, harassment of Malaysian fishermen, assaults on Malaysian trading and naval vessels, border clashes with Malaysian Armed Forces and the landing of Indonesian commandoes inside Malaysia.

Fortunately for the newborn Malaysian nation, Indonesian hostilities and open acts of aggression ended following the Sept 30, 1965 abortive PKI coup that eventually resulted in Gen Suharto replacing Soekarno as president.

This dramatic turn in events opened the way for a series of diplomatic negotiations for normalising relations that was formalised through the signing of the Malaysia-Indonesia Peace Accord on Aug 11, 1966.

The diplomatic prowess of Tun Ghazali Shafie was specially appointed by prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman as a member of the Cobbold Commission with the specific task of being Malaya's point-man in the Malaysia merger negotiations and his subsequent role in bringing about normalisation of relations with Indonesia can hardly be exaggerated and merit a separate treatment.