

MALAYSIA: The End of Confrontation

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NOT all recent episodes in British foreign policy have come to the happy ending now envisaged for Malaysia's resistance to the 'con- frontation' with Indonesia. Indeed, if the peace talks due to be held some time in the next few days between the Foreign Minister of Indonesia and the deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia in Bangkok are successful, they may lead to some- thing of a myth. Before this happens it is worth looking a little more closely.

Confrontation first began early in 1963 and has remained difficult to define in practical terms ever since. It has always meant different things to different countries. It has led at times to some notably bellicose statements from all sides, in- cluding reliable reports from Singapore of how British squadrons were ever ready to meet an Indonesian aerial attack on the island with a similar attack on Djakarta. Mr Harold Wilson, who had accepted the British commitment to Malaysia before he came to office, spoke with aggressive pride of the 51,000 British troops defending the area. Mr R. A. Butler, when he was at the Foreign Office, had apparently con- cluded an agreement with the Americans that while they should look after North Vietnam we should cope with Indonesia, and to many people these remained parallel commitments. Britain and the United States were fighting the same war, only on different fronts.

That was one way of looking at it. But Presi- dent Sukarno did not make things easier, for it all depended whether he was taken at his most cajoling word or his most threatening. Confronta- tion for him ranged from wanting an assurance that the British base in Singapore would not be directed at Indonesia to a desire to have the British presence removed altogether and the Federation of Malaysia dismembered. The British, who had had experience of this mixture elsewhere, took him at his most threatening.

Nevertheless, confrontation militarily did not seem really to get off the ground. As far as it did, it reached its peak in the summer of 1964 when there were two air drops of Indonesian guerrillas plus a platoon-strength landing on the Malaysian coast. These men caused no great trouble and, if official accounts are to be believed, were almost laughably ill-equipped for the task in hand. The majority were either caught or gave themselves up within a few days.

The last incident of any real significance seems to have taken place in February this year when an Indonesian patrol crossed over the border from Indonesian Borneo. Apart from this, the pattern of an average week's activities might include little more than odd bursts of gunfire at various scattered points along the Borneo border and the capture of the occasional armed Chinese trying to cross into Sarawak.

To put it like this is not to belittle the British military effort, for it can clearly be argued that it was only by acting early and firmly that aggression was contained, and certainly the firmness of the British-Malaysian response seems to have got home to President Sukarno : otherwise it is difficult to see why he did not continue with his policy of air drops and platoon-strength landings. Even at this level, in Borneo alone the Indonesian threat has been sufficient to require the continued presence of ten British battalions. If the action had been seriously stepped up, it has been calculated that this would have required a

British response large enough to have ruled out fulfilling any serious commitments elsewhere.

It is well known that the events which led to the provisional Indonesian promise to call the whole thing off were set in train by the abortive coup in Djakarta on September 30 last year and the gradual emergence of a new, and seemingly more responsible, Indonesian regime. That this regime should appear to desire peaceful relations with Britain and Malaysia may be part of its general good sense but certainly has little to do with any very direct overtures from Britain. It will be remembered that Mr Patrick Gordon Walker, then a senior figure in British politics, did not even touch on Indonesia in his peace-finding tour of South-East Asia early last year. Sir Andrew Gilchrist, until very recently the British Ambassador in Djakarta, found his official presence in the place almost unwanted. Sir Andrew did, however, make friends with a number of Indonesian intellectuals, among them the ex-ambassador to Moscow and leader of the small and banned Murba party, by the name of Adam Malik, who recently replaced Dr Subandrio as Foreign Minister. Though a Marxist, Mr Malik was regarded as not inaccessible to Western approaches and such approaches were duly made about confrontation through the British embassy. The £1 million gift offer was slipped in later.

Yet confrontation could not be called off overnight. President Sukarno after all, though officially stripped of his powers, was still a presence to be reckoned with, and there was also the uncompromising position of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, who at one stage was dismissing repeated Indonesian overtures as insincere.

Mr Malik therefore invited the permanent secretary to the Malaysian Foreign Office to a secret meeting in Bangkok to press his genuine desire for peace, at which he seems to have promised to go away and make certain peaceable statements which would convince even the Tunku. The chief of these was that Indonesia was no longer insisting on a new test of opinion as to whether Sabah and Sarawak really wanted to belong to the Federation. Dr Malik kept his promise and made the statement to the Australian radio. Thus the peace talks, for which the immediate omens are good, should take place at any moment, with Indonesia perhaps agreeing to accept the forthcoming elections in Sabah as sufficient test of the territory's will to stick with Malaysia.

Has it then all been a carefully calculated success where firmness against aggression has reaped its rightful dividends in the end? It must be said that there are still too many imponderables for the situation to be clearly resolved yet. There are the strained relations between Malaysia and its ex-federation partner, Singapore. There is the abrupt British decision to suspend her military aid to Malaysia, a decision which the Tunku has taken quietly but which has infuriated many of his ministers. Above all, perhaps, there is the question of how permanent is the Indonesian new look and how powerful is the country's new Foreign Minister. Yet on the whole it appears that the confrontation episode is drawing to an unusually happy end, even if it is conceded also that it has required an unusual amount of luck.

To the question of whether so much British support was ever really necessary the answer is, militarily probably yes, but perhaps only because in the beginning a diplomatic solution was never really sought. Yet now that the whole thing seems to be over it is still unlikely that many of the troops will be coming home very soon. It is difficult for Britain both to cut off Malaysia's defence aid and to remove her battalions. Besides, until the whole outline of Britain's east of Suez role is clearer, no one wants to raise too many awkward questions about what will the troops do it, next.

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