

## Foreign troops on our soil: the true history

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Former Supreme Court judge and now deputy chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) Harun Hashim recently suggested that, after Malaya achieved its independence in 1957, there has not been any foreign troops in our country.

Writing in his column 'Benchmark' in the *New Straits Times* on Sept 12, Harun said: "As we celebrate the 45th anniversary of Merdeka we are reminded that we achieved Independence after 400 years of colonisation. First, it was the Portuguese, then the Dutch, the British followed by the Japanese, and then the British again. We watched with much satisfaction and pride when the British military forces finally left our shores. We were free at last."

He added: "In the early days of our independence, the US made its first attempts to gain a foothold in Malaya by persuading us to join the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (Seato), a military alliance led by the US, by offering to build for free the East-West Highway in the north of Malaya bordering Thailand. Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra refused to have anything to do with Seato to keep this country free from the presence of foreign troops on our soil."

While it is true that Malaya/Malaysia had never joined the US-led South East Asia Treaty Organisation (Seato) throughout the existence of the anti-Communist military alliance from 1954 and 1977, it is wrong and a distortion of historical fact that Malaya/Malaysia had no relationship whatsoever with Seato.

It is also factually wrong to suggest that there was no more foreign troops on Malayan/Malaysian soil immediately after Aug 31, 1957.

### **Communists and Confrontation**

In October 1957, a bilateral treaty of military alliance between Britain and the Federation of Malaya came into effect, providing the legal basis for British troops to operate in the independent Malaya and continue to conduct war-like security operations against the communist insurgents, although the latter had already been weakened considerably. The treaty was called the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA). In April 1959, Australia and New Zealand became the associated members of AMDA.

Earlier in 1955, the armed forces of Britain, Australia, New Zealand and other Commonwealth countries operating in Malaya were integrated under a single British command as the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve (CSR). CSR continued to operate in independent Malaya on the basis of AMDA. AMDA was later renamed Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement after Sept 16, 1963 when the Federation of Malaysia was formed to include Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak.

After the separation of Singapore on Aug 9, 1965, the AMDA remained in force until 1971 when it was replaced by the existing Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).

FPDA is a looser framework of defence cooperation among Malaysia, Singapore, Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

Besides conducting war-like security operations against communist insurgents in peninsula Malaysia until 1960 when the Emergency officially ended, British, Australian, New Zealand and other Commonwealth armed forces were also engaged in actual and ground combats in Sarawak from 1963 to 1966 when the security of the newly formed Malaysia was gravely threatened by Indonesian militia and para-military groups.

Indonesia under President Sukarno opposed the formation of Malaysia and vowed to 'crush' it by diplomatic, political and military means. Indonesian hostility towards Malaysia was called Confrontation or Konfrontasi.

Like it or not, seen against the true historical background, the very survival of Malaya and Malaysia as a politically independent state was secured by foreign troops from Britain, Australia, New Zealand and other Commonwealth countries.

There was, of course, opposition to the operation of foreign troops in Malaya and Malaysia. It came from opposition parties like PMIP (Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, as PAS was then popularly known), People's Party (PRM) and the now defunct Labour Party of Malaya. Umno and the Alliance government supported the presence and operation of foreign troops in Malaya/Malaysia. These are facts, not opinions or value judgments.

### **Defence and security alliance**

It was true that independent Malaya/Malaysia had never formally join the US-led Seato formed in Bangkok in 1955 as the institutional expression of the Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty of 1954.

The Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty, commonly known as the Manila Pact, was a multilateral defence and security alliance formed by the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, France, Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines. It was a defensive response of the Western powers and their Asian allies to the military defeat of France in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in the hands of the Vietnamese Communist in mid-1954.

However, because of the fact that Britain, Australia and New Zealand were members of the US-led Seato, as well as the AMDA, they could technically invoke Seato and call in American troops as succours if, in the event and/or processes of defending Malaya/Malaysia during the Emergency and Confrontation, their armed forces or military facilities in Malaya/Malaysia were attacked by hostile powers and/or forces.

However, since the United States was already preoccupied with, and committed to the security situations in Western Europe and Indochina, and British, Australian and New Zealand troops in Malaya/Malaysia were rather 'effective', no American troops were committed to the grounds in Malaya/Malaysia either during the Emergency (1948-1960) or the Indonesian Confrontation (1963-1966).

Still, Malaya/Malaysia was indirectly linked to the US-led Seato, although the Umno-dominated Alliance government did not formally commit the country to be an official ally of the United States.

### **Seato disbanded in 1977**

In fact, not only was the defence of Malaya/Malaysia technically and ultimately covered by Seato through AMDA because of the overlapping memberships of Britain, Australia and New Zealand in the two military alliances, AMDA also allowed the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve (CSR) which was stationed in Malaya/Malaysia to be used for Seato operations outside the geographical scope of AMDA, such as Laos in Indochina.

In other words, Malaya/Malaysia was a *de facto* or non-official military base of the US-led Seato from October 1957 to 1971. Seato itself was disbanded in 1977.

One of the major reasons Malaya/Malaysia did not officially join Seato was the strong and popular objection and opposition mounted by opposition parties like PMIP (PAS), PRM and the Labour Party of Malaya. Seato was also viewed with suspicion and hostility by the communist Soviet Union and People's Republic of China, and the neutralist Indonesia and India at that time.

Whatever the lessons one draws from history, material facts and critical realities of the late 1950s and 1960s must not be distorted, compromised or omitted for political expediency in 2002 for the production and circulation of nationalist myths.