

Tunku Abdul Rahman — the pro-West 'nationalist'

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Love or loathe Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first prime minister of Malaya/Malaysia, he was not as “nationalist” and “neutralist” the way former supreme court judge Harun Hashim portrayed him to be.

According to Harun, who wrote in the *New Straits Times* on Sept 12, “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 from the presence of foreign troops on our soil.”

As this writer has pointed out, while Malaya/Malaysia never formally joined Seato, its defence and security were indirectly but effectively and ultimately linked to the US-led military alliance, through the overlapping memberships of Britain, Australia and New Zealand in both Seato and the Anglo-Malayan/Malaysian Defence Agreement (AMDA).

In fact, since Australia, New Zealand and the US were members of the Anzus military alliance formed in 1951, American military resources could also be technically called into Malaya/Malaysia via AMDA after April 1959 when Australia and New Zealand joined AMDA.

Moreover, as the British, Australian, New Zealand and other Commonwealth armed forces which operated in Malaya/Malaysia then were able to be mobilised and transferred, through Singapore, to be used for Seato military operations in areas outside the scope of AMDA — like Laos in Indochina in 1961-62 — independent Malaya/Malaysia was a *de facto* military base of the US-led Seato.

That relationship lasted from October 1957 (when AMDA came into force after Seato was created in 1955) and, at least, November 1971 (when AMDA lapsed and was superseded by the Five Power Defence Arrangements).

Pro-American policies

Tunku Abdul Rahman (seen here with Nixon in 1964 during a function in Kuala Lumpur) knew about all these overlapping Western military alliances in the Cold War, and their technical inter-connections. The Anglophile was certainly anti-communist and pro-Western.

However, because of domestic as well as regional opposition to Seato, he had to repeatedly and vehemently deny any relationships between Malaya/Malaysia and the US-led military alliance aimed at preventing the spread of communist ideas and forces from China, North Korea and Indochina to Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines, as the Domino Theory hypothesised.

In any case, Tunku Abdul Rahman's pro-US position in foreign policies, especially towards Indochina, were clear. For example, it has now been well and credibly documented that the first premier and his government fully supported American military involvement in the Vietnam War, including the massive bombing of North Vietnam in 1965.

According to a former associated professor of history with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Pamela Sodhy, between 1961 and 1966, Malaya/Malaysia under the premiership of Tunku Abdul Rahman helped to train over 3,000 South Vietnamese officers in anti-guerilla operations. The training in Malaya/Malaysia began as early as 1958 after the premier officially visited the US-backed South Vietnam.

After the Emergency ended in 1960, Tunku Abdul Rahman's government decided to give the US-backed South Vietnamese government in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) "much of its military equipment".

The Briggs' Plan to resettle Chinese Malaysians in the New Villages during the Emergency in order to cut off food and intelligence supply to the communist insurgents, was also introduced by the American military advisers in South Vietnam as the concept of 'strategic hamlets', although it failed miserably in another politico-cultural milieu. (see Pamela Sodhy, *The US-Malaysian Nexus - Themes in Superpower- Small State Relations*, Kuala Lumpur, ISIS, 1991: pp.209, 263-264)

There are also documented details of US military aids to Malaya/Malaysia under premiership of Tunku Abdul Rahman, although the amounts were not considered large or significant, as compared to other countries like South Vietnam, South Korea, Thailand or the Philippines.

Self-interested support

The rationale for this support towards the military involvement of the US in Vietnam was the fear of the Domino Theory. According to this theory, South Vietnam was a bulwark against the southward spread of communist ideas and forces, and if South Vietnam fell into the hands of the communists, Thailand, Peninsula Malaysia and Singapore would be endangered militarily and politically.

The Malayan/Malaysian support for the US position in Vietnam and Indochina was, therefore, self-interested as well as ideological. Love or loathe him, Tunku Abdul Rahman's position reflected the shared threat perception of the United States and non-communist or anti-communist portion of the Southeast Asian societies.

To be sure, for those who supported or sympathised with the struggle of the communist-led or inspired national liberation movements at that time, Tunku Abdul Rahman was a 'stooge' of the US and Western 'imperialism'.

But for those who see parliamentary democracy and 'free market' as better ways of organising states and societies, the same Tunku Abdul Rahman was a "defender of the free world and Southeast Asia".

Whatever position one takes now, the historical fact remains that Tunku Abdul Rahman was not as “nationalist” or “neutralist” *vis-a-vis* the US or Seato, as the nationalist myths now suggest.

Ideologies, opinions and value judgements may differ and even clash, but let historical facts be always respected as they were.