

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GDN-33
Malaysia and the Jungle
Warfare of International Diplomacy

28 College Green
Singapore 11
14 February 1964

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

In mid-January Robert Kennedy and his wife visited Kuala Lumpur on part of a whirlwind tour through Asia, and England, in an attempt to transplant the Malaysia dispute from the deadly violence of the Borneo jungles to the calm atmosphere of the conference room. He brought first hope, then dark suspicion, and finally an optimism so guarded as to border on pessimism.

The Malaysia dispute is older than this four-month old country itself, but its violent aspects are of more recent origin. It is primarily a dispute with the Indonesians, who feel that the ten million Malaysians are encircling that great nation of one hundred million and threatening its anti-colonial anti-imperial revolution. At the first mention of the Malaysia proposal, in May 1961, the Indonesians expressed no opposition, almost no interest. They were then too busy wresting West Irian from the Dutch. With West Irian in its hands, however, Indonesia began to breathe down the neck of the still unformed Malaysia by supporting the abortive Brunei rebellion of Azahari in December 1962. The next year a policy of konfrontasi, or confrontation, was announced; the aim was to crush Malaysia, though it was not made clear just how this was to be done.

Observers here, perhaps correctly, date Indonesian opposition to Malaysia from this country's involvement in the Sino-Indian border dispute. On a visit to India, Malaya's Prime Minister expressed unqualified support for the Indian case and later established a "Save Democracy Fund" in Kuala Lumpur for the unhappy victims of Chinese Communist aggression. This allegedly brought down on Malaya the concerted opposition of every Communist party in the region.

Just before Malaysia was born, Malayan, Indonesian and Philippine leaders were brought together in Manila to form a nebulous association called Maphilindo, though still without an Indonesian renunciation of konfrontasi. With the birth of Malaysia in September 1963 diplomatic relations were broken off as Indonesia and the Philippines refused to recognize the new federation; the Philippines break was mild but Indonesia withdrew its ambassador and began enlisting "volunteers" to conduct guerilla warfare over the border in Sarawak and Sabah (the new independent name of North Borneo). Sarawak Chinese, old Brunei rebels, and Indonesian regulars have been the principal combatants in what is becoming a dirty and costly bit of guerilla activity. The Malaysia and British governments have responded with troops and police, who appear to be more than a match for the Indonesians, despite the great advantages guerilla warfare gives to the aggressor. (This is apparently an aggressor that needs a very great advantage).

Through Maphilindo and the breaks in diplomatic relations with Malaysia, Sukarno had managed to draw the Philippines into his sphere of influence, though not into his program of konfrontasi or violence. More recently the Great Leader of the Revolution has presented his case to Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk, who has

his own differences with the western powers. In addition, through the Asian Games and Ganefo, the Games of the New Emerging Forces, both staged in the Bung Karno sports complex in Djakarta, Sukarno has gained at least the moral support of the new states for Indonesia's fierce struggle against colonialism and imperialism, and its synonym (to Indonesia), Malaysia.

In its own foreign policy, Malaysia seemed almost intent upon sustaining the Indonesian arguments. The first announcement of the Malaysia proposal was high-handed and paternalistic, implicitly ignoring the wishes of the Borneo territories that were to be involved. This was followed later by the Malayan Prime Minister's announcement that he would give the Borneo territories 40 seats in the proposed federal house of representatives. Throughout, there has been no effort, beyond a few U.N. speeches, to explain Malaysia's case to, and enlist the support of, the other new states of the world. Throughout, reliance has been placed almost exclusively upon the protection offered by British military power in the region. Finally, rather than trying to win over the Filipinos, Malaya's Prime Minister has virtually driven them into the arms of Sukarno by categorically rejecting their long standing (and apparently not completely unfounded) claim to the eastern part of Sabah.

All of this can only be called a major diplomatic failure, for it presents in the image of uncompromising colonial paternalism a new state that is essentially democratic and pragmatic. Brunei is not now included in the new state of Malaysia because it decided to remain outside. A referendum and a free election before Malaysia confirmed Singapore's democratic decision to join. In Sarawak and Sabah this decision was confirmed by elections and a (British) commission of enquiry before Malaysia and a U.N. enquiry in the very midst of Malaysia's birth. And now, even with konfrontasi and a military threat hanging over its head, Malaysia is still going ahead with plans for its scheduled national elections this year. No constitutions have been set aside, no elections have been postponed (though some arrests have been made), and there has been no attempt to move against the wishes of the people, as far as those wishes can be ascertained.

Contrast this with Indonesia's acquisition of West Irian. This half of an island with its stone-age people was given to Indonesia by the rest of the world, because it had earlier been a part of the Netherlands Indies. (There is little reason to believe that Indonesia would have been physically capable of taking it from the Dutch by herself). The Indonesian promise to hold a plebiscite has not yet been honored and there is almost no likelihood that it will be. After all, why should stone-age savages be given the vote when it is not enjoyed by the Indonesian people themselves? Malaysia's diplomatic failure is thus compounded. This free and democratic nation is cast in the guise of the imperialist enslaver, while the incompetent totalitarian government in Djakarta is cast in the guise of the anti-imperialist defender of national independence.

Certainly a good part of the current difficulties in the Malaysian dispute must be laid at the feet of the Malaysian diplomats themselves. Regardless of where the blame lay, however, early this year the situation was serious in the extreme. Malaysia was being isolated diplomatically and the military situation threatened to escalate (in the marvelous jargon of the new realpolitik) and to involve Australia and New Zealand, and hence the U.S.

in a major shooting war in the Borneo jungles and beyond. It also appeared that in the U.S. President Johnson was under considerable pressure to do something about the rakish charismatic dictator in Djakarta.

Something clearly had to be done and someone clearly had to do it. If the immediate goal were to stop the shooting, the decision to send Robert Kennedy was probably the best of all possible choices. It would have to be Indonesia, not Malaysia, that would effect a cease-fire, and at present the U.S. is probably the single western power most acceptable to the Indonesians. In addition, Robert Kennedy had the great advantage of being the brother of our late president, a man whose youth and vigor and rightness in so many things made him, by Asiapoll findings, the single most respected world leader in major Asian centers. If any western statesman could induce Sukarno to stop the shooting, Robert Kennedy was obviously the man to do it.

When they first learned of Kennedy's proposed visit, therefore, Malaysians took heart. At last here was America turning a sympathetic eye in their direction. It must be remembered that to Malaysians this was the America that had paid part of the bill for Indonesia's large purchases of Russian war material, whose Ambassador had shouted "Merdeka" (Independence) with the Indonesians at West Irian rallies, and whose G.S.A. had disrupted the rubber and tin markets by sales of strategic stockpiled materials. It was something of a wonder that the Malaysians could be at all sanguine about what the American leaders would do in this case. However, as they saw it, there was only one thing that Kennedy could do: he could stop the shooting. This might be hard on the trigger-happy and heavily armed Indonesians, but it would allow the Malaysians to redirect their resources back into their dynamic investment program. Thus as Malaysians watched Kennedy talk with Sukarno in Tokyo, the future seemed bright. Then Kennedy arrived in Kuala Lumpur and we had a few days of anxiety. Rumors circulated; speculation was rife. His tone was guarded and the papers here began to talk of Munich and to wonder what kind of pressures he was bringing to bear on the Malaysian leadership. As Kennedy left for Djakarta Malaysians collectively held their breath and waited for news to come. When it came it was good. Sukarno agreed publicly and unconditionally to a cease-fire. For a moment the relief was visible. America had not sold Malaysia out in support of a Sukarno, who was believed (like Mussolini) to be holding the country together and keeping it from falling to the Communists. Then new questions began to emerge. Who would gain what by the cease-fire?

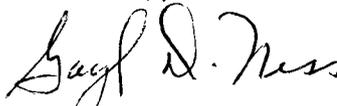
Malaysia would gain fewer casualties, but most of the other gains appear to go to the skillful tactician, Sukarno. Indonesian guerillas had to be notified of the cease-fire by air-dropped leaflets. By dropping far more leaflets over a larger area than necessary, and in the process buzzing Malaysian-Borneo villages, Sukarno gives the impression of having far more power than he really has. At home he saves face by observing that a leader of a great power visited him in his own capital. And he emerges from an aggressive role in the guise of the man of peace. Woe to Malaysia. Von Clausewitz pointed out more than a century ago that war is the last resort of the defender; the aggressor always prefers a peaceful to a violent annexation of territory. Thus the cease-fire allows Indonesia, with its ill-controlled 300,000 man army and its billion dollars worth of ill-manned, rusting, obsolete, but still deadly Soviet war material, a country that is at once the most ludicrous and the most threatening military power in Southeast Asia, to assume the mantle of the dove of peace. Again, though perhaps only temporarily, Sukarno's skills in foreign diplomacy have outshone Malaysia's.

As the Malaysians see it, the cease-fire is also a great relief to the outside powers that are involved. For America, Australia and New Zealand it means a postponement of the terrible possibility of escalation and the involvement in a hot war. The question Malaysians ask is: for how long and at what price? Memories of the Rhineland, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Manchuria lurk threateningly in the background; and they echo von Clausewitz: war is for the defenders. To the Malaysians this is not an argument for war. There is no war hysteria here and no desire for war. On the contrary there is only the desire to get on with the business of business and life, not with the business of killing. Yet there is an undercurrent of uneasiness here, a fear that in the attempt to avoid conflict at all costs, the outside powers will only be more totally and more violently involved at a later date; and that long before then, Malaysia will have gone the way of the small country that relies only on the large for protection.

Probably the most hopeful sign in this dispute, however, is what the Malaysians themselves are learning about the jungle warfare of international diplomacy. Singapore's Prime Minister, LEE Kuan Yew, is now leading a mission of truth to Africa, undertaking to explain the Malaysian case and to gain at least the moral support of that large block of new nations. The very recognition of the importance of such support is itself a major step forward for Malaysia. Closer to home, Robert Kennedy's mission has resulted in a meeting in Bangkok between the Indonesian and Philippine foreign ministers and Malaysia's deputy prime minister, Tun Razak. Unlike Malaysia's affable prime minister, who almost gave the country away in signing the Maphilindo declaration in Manila, Razak is a careful and skillful negotiator. His opening statement in Bangkok demonstrated that there is neither belligerence nor capitulation in the Malaysian stance, nor is there the probability that he will commit the country to any course of action without firm guarantees of its integrity.

In addition, alongside the tripartite meetings in Bangkok, informal talks are being held between Malaysia and the Philippines on the resumption of diplomatic relations. It would indeed be a significant victory if Malaysia could succeed in separating the Filipinos from their close association with Sukarno, an association about which they are themselves increasingly uneasy. This will require a difficult reversal of Malaysia's previously uncompromising stand on the Philippine claim to part of Sabah, but the Philippines has always expressed a willingness to submit the claim to the world court, and the Malaysians have the heavy weight of self determination on their side (no one in Sabah wants to join the Philippines). This only opens the way for skillful diplomacy, however, and will be the first real test of how well and quickly the Malaysians have learned the art of self defense in this kind of jungle warfare.

Sincerely,


Gayl D. Ness