

## CHAPTER THREE

### 1957-1969: EARLY RELATIONS BETWEEN VIETNAM AND MALAYSIA

#### 3.1. Introduction

The independence of Malaya in 1957 marked the beginning of official diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Malaysia. The Republic of Vietnam (RVN) extended recognition to Malaya in the same year, thus beginning a new phase of bilateral relations that provided more direct contacts, but at the same time governed very much by the escalation of the Vietnam war. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) however, remained skeptical, if not hostile towards Malaya.

This chapter aims to trace the course of the bilateral relationship in the midst of the Vietnam war, as well as the wider context of the Cold War. The two Vietnams' perception of Malaya, and later Malaysia's role in the Vietnam war will also be examined.

#### 3.2. The Vietnam War and Malaysia

The increased hostilities by the DRV against the RVN through infiltrators, and open conflict nullified the provisions of the Geneva Agreement to which ironically, the DRV was a signatory while the RVN was not. The hostilities that would continue for the next two decades

paved the way for US intervention in South Vietnam, through the provisions laid down in the Protocol of the SEATO Agreement of September 1954, whose network extended<sup>1</sup> the defense perimeter to include the Indochinese States.

The US intervention was made on the rationale of the Domino Theory, put forward by Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles of the Eisenhower Administration. The theory stated that the rest of Southeast Asia would fall to communism like dominoes once the RVN was overrun by the Hanoi forces. As Hanoi was regarded as the agent of international communism in Southeast Asia, it was vital for the US to defend the RVN. This theory was not without foundation, as firstly, in the late 1940s and fifties, countries in Southeast Asia were battling communist-insurgency, such as the CPM in Malaya and the Hukbalahap in the Philippines. Secondly, by defending South Vietnam against communist conquest, the political separation of Vietnam into two ideologically different states would deny the DRV of the prospect of a stronger communist Vietnam. Thirdly, US intervention in Vietnam was intended to "buy time" for non-communist Southeast Asia to develop national and regional resilience against internal and external

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1. See, "Protocol to the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, 8 September 1954", Doc.394 in Gareth Porter (ed), Vietnam: The Definite Documentation of Human Decisions, Vol.2, Earl M. Coleman Enterprises Inc. Publisher, New York, 1979, p.681.

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communist threats.

The validity of this theory was stressed by President Kennedy on a TV interview programme. Kennedy believed that if the RVN falls, the rest of Southeast Asia will succumb to communism. If South Vietnam fell, he argued, it would improve China's position for a guerilla assault on Malaya, and would also give the impression that China and 3 communism were the wave of the future in Southeast Asia. Speaking in 1962 on the Laotian crisis in 1962, President John F. Kennedy said:

My fellow Americans, Laos is far away from America, but the world is small. Its two million people live in a country three times the size of Austria. The security of all Southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence. Its own safety runs with the safety of us all -- in real neutrality observed by 4 all.

As US military and economic assistance began to flood the RVN, Malaya, a newly independent nation was inevitably drawn into this not so cold war in Vietnam -- a result of its anti-communist and pro-western stand. Using Hans Morgenthau's concept of the Balance of Power, Malaysia's

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2. This line of argument has been also called the "Rostow thesis". See W. W. Rostow, The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1972, pp.269-271.
3. The Times, 10 September 1963.
4. Public Papers, 1961, Washington D. C., p.214 as quoted in W. W. Rostow, op.cit., p.267.

stand can best be understood as aimed at preserving its  
new-won independence.<sup>5</sup> The Malayan Emergency is in many  
ways similar to the RVN situation, but minus the massive  
US involvement. It is no surprise that the RVN was the  
first state ever visited by Tunku Abdul Rahman as Prime  
Minister of Malaya, on the invitation of President Ngo  
Dinh Diem. This invitation was clearly a part of Ngo's  
unceasing effort in the RVN's anti-communist campaign, and  
a vital programme to build friendship with ideological  
allies.

The Tunku's visit to Saigon in 1958 was reciprocated  
by President Ngo Dinh Diem's visit to Malaya twice, on  
28-31 January 1958, and again in October 1961. There was  
no doubt that great friendship and mutual admiration was  
high for both the leaders.<sup>6</sup> On each occasion, the two  
countries expressed their support for each other in their  
respective struggle against the communists. Encouragement  
was also given to each other in their contributions to the  
defence of the 'Freeworld', as both countries believed  
that they "are standing in the front line of" the defence

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5. Hans J. Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations, Alfred A.  
Knopf, New York, 1973, p.187.

6. Tunku Abdul Rahman, Looking Back, Pustaka Antara,  
Kuala Lumpur, 1977, p.140.



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of the "Freeworld". But what was more important was the increased role played by Malaya and later Malaysia in supporting the RVN in its anti-Communist effort. Malaya and later Malaysia was to help train RVN Armed Forces and Police personnel, supplied surplus weapons to the RVN and later served as Refit and Recreation Centre for US servicemen serving in Vietnam.

As early as 1959, assistance was given by Malaya to Vietnam in the form of training its Armed Forces personnel in jungle warfare and also police personnel in police-work. In early 1961 Saigon received three shipments of police equipment from Malaya as its gesture of support to the RVN's struggle against the communists. The whole consignment of weapons consisted of 55,475 shotguns, 346 signal pistols, 450 Browning automatic pistols, 836 carbines, 45,707 rifles, more than 10,000 other small arms together with 346 armoured vehicles, 241 scout cars and 206 armoured weapon carriers. Tunku Abdul Rahman said later in 1965:

My country was the first to help Vietnam by sending arms and other materials because we believe that Viet<sup>9</sup>  
Nam has a right to live its own life.

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7. Tunku stated this while replying to the toast in his honour during his visit to Saigon in 1958, Sunday Mail, 27 September 1970.
  8. Straits Times, 2 January 1962.
  9. The Saigon Post, 4 May 1965.

All this equipment represented left-overs from the 12-year emergency which ended in July 1960. However, the whole operation was conducted in secret as first it was in violation of Article 17 of the Geneva Agreement,<sup>10</sup> and secondly, the Malayan Government wasn't sure of the opposition parties' reaction.<sup>11</sup>

Three major factors or reasons behind Malaya and later Malaysia's support for the RVN, are: (1) Malaysia's fear of the Chinese threat, (2) Malaysia's anti-communist stand and,<sup>12</sup> (3) sympathy for the RVN's ordeal.

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The Chinese threat has been a main consideration of Malaysia's foreign policy in terms of its relations with  
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10. Article 17(a) of the Geneva Agreement stated that: "With effect from the date of entry into force of the present agreements, the introduction into Vietnam of any reinforcements in the form of all types of arms, munitions and other war material such as combat aircraft, naval craft, pieces of ordinance, jet engines and jet weapons and armoured vehicles, is prohibited." "The Geneva Accord, July 20, 1954", Doc.378 in Gareth Porter (ed), Vietnam: The Definite Documentation of Human Decisions, Vol.I, Earl M. Coleman Enterprises Inc. Publishers, new York, 1979, p.647.
11. Sunday Mail, 27 September 1970.
12. Khaw Guat Hoon, "Malaysian Policies in Southeast Asia 1957-1970, The Search for Security", Phd. Dissertation, Universite de Geneve, Geneva, 1976, pp.125-133.
13. For a detailed study on the Chinese threat, see Michael Yahuda, The Chinese Threat, Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 1986.

other Southeast Asian countries. Though geographically far, Malaysia, ever since Tunku's administration, has always seen the communist threat in Southeast Asia and Asia as "within the framework of this threat" from China.<sup>14</sup> Thus it was not surprising when Tunku declared that the DRV's aggression was backed by the PRC.<sup>15</sup> The fact that 35% of Malaysians are ethnic Chinese also led to the Malaysian leaders' apprehension towards China. Hence when the DRV launched its aggression against the RVN, the Malaysian leadership invariably viewed it as part of the Chinese expansion programme which should be checked.

Malaysia's bitter experience of 12 years in battling communist insurgents was strongly imprinted in the minds of Malaysian foreign policy makers. This perception was closely linked to their fears in the realization of the Domino Theory. Kuala Lumpur also worried about the effect of the communist victory in Vietnam upon the local CPM which was still conducting an armed struggle against the Malaysian Government. A victory by the DRV in Vietnam would boost their morale if not enhance support for the CPM thus posing once again severe threat to the security of the nation. The effect of a communist success in Indochina was felt in Malaya as early as in 1953 at the

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14. Foreign Affairs Malaysia, Vol.I, No.2, 1966, p.46.

15. Ibid.

height of the Emergency when Viet-Minh success in Vietnam against the French resulted in a decline of the number of communist surrenders in Malaya.<sup>16</sup>

How far the sympathy factor played a part in influencing Malaya's support for the RVN is debatable. Khaw suggested this was based on Malaysia's common experience of anti-communist bitterness, and the suffering of the Vietnamese people.<sup>17</sup> It would be more logical to accept the first of the two considerations, as a nation's foreign policy is necessarily influenced more by its own national interest and security concerns rather than sentimental factors. Thus Malaysia's willingness to assist the RVN stemmed from its own consideration of national security and its leaders' belief in the Domino Theory. Thus, when Malaya assisted the Saigon regime, it was done with the sole purpose of ensuring the existence of a stronger RVN against the communist-DRV threat, and to check the communist advance indirectly. In doing so it also demonstrated Malaya's pro-west inclination.

Needless to say, Diem's RVN was pleased with the support given by Malaya for the anti-communist insurgency

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16. Great Britain, Colonial Office, Southeast Asia Original Correspondence, CO1022, Vol.49, Telegram from Sir Gerald Templer to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 18 June 1953.

17. Khaw Guat Hoon, op.cit., p.132.

warfare in South Vietnam. On the other hand, the DRV was critical of Malaya's action. It was particularly annoyed at Malaya's assistance as being contrary to Article 17(a) of the Geneva Agreement. It even threatened to bring the case to the attention of the International Court of Justice.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.3. Strategic Hamlets

One interesting feature of the Vietnam War was the implementation of the Strategic Hamlets programme. Although it does not have much to do with this study, it somehow gives an insight into the way the war was conducted in Vietnam compared to Malaya during the Emergency. Introduced at the suggestion of the Kennedy Administration in 1963, the programme was adopted by the Saigon regime to improve security in the countryside. The programme was a sequel to the "Agro-viles" programme which had been created by Diem's regime earlier in 1959. The whole concept of the strategic hamlets was modeled after the Brigg's plan in the Malayan Emergency aimed at protecting the rural inhabitants from the communist terrorists and at the same time denying the communists

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18. Hsinhua News Agency, 22 January 1961, as quoted in Khaw Guat Hoon, op.cit., p.137.

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support and information from the villagers. While the programme in Malaya involved the resettlement of villagers into the later-called New Villages, the strategic hamlets programme in Vietnam only involved the defence of existing villages and hamlets, and providing them with necessary infrastructure.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the resettlement programme in Malaya under the Brigg's Plan<sup>21</sup> which involved greater area and stronger fortified defense of the area, the scattered and small units of strategic hamlets were too vulnerable to external attacks, thus limiting the effectiveness of the system.

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The programme was implemented with great enthusiasm by Diem's Administration and, like Malaya, it achieved some positive results in the early stages by creating severe problems for the People's Liberation Armed Forces

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19. The Times, 21 January 1963.

20. For a detailed study on Strategic Hamlets, see Milton E. Osborne, Strategic Hamlets in South Viet-Nam: A Study and Comparison, Data Paper No. 55, Southeast Asian Program, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1965. See also Robert Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency. The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam, Studies in International Security: 10, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1966, pp.121-140.

21. The Brigg's Plan was the successful resettlement programme of Chinese squatters in Peninsular Malaysia during the Emergency 1948-1960, named after its initiator General Harold Briggs, then Director of Operations. The programme resulted in the successful denial of support to the communist.

22. The Times, 21 January 1963.

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(PLAF) or the Viet Cong. By the end of September 1962, a total of 11,316 hamlets were planned, and 3,225 were completed, containing over 4 million people, a third of the total population. A further 2,500 hamlets were completed by May 1963.<sup>24</sup> Even after Diem's death, the programme was carried on by the succeeding regime under General Duong Van Minh,<sup>25</sup> the leader who overthrew Diem. General Minh stressed that much could be learned by drawing on the impressive experience in Malaysia's fortified villages.<sup>26</sup> However, PLAF persistence resulted in the destruction or take over of many strategic hamlets, and with the usual problem of corruption and mismanagement, led to its widespread unpopularity, so that by the mid-1960s the programme was virtually a failure. The programme was renamed New Life Hamlet Program by Prime

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23. The PLAF was the formal name of the armed forces of the revolutionary movement in the Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Commonly known as the "Viet Cong", it came into existence at a secret military conference held near Saigon in February 1961. See William J. Duiker, Historical Dictionary of Vietnam, The Scarecrow Press, New Jersey, 1989, p.161.

24. W. W. Rostow, op.cit., p.281.

25. General Duong Van Minh, nicknamed "Big Minh" was a general in ARVN, and also the leading force behind the Coup d'etat that overthrew President Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in November 1963. Became the last president of the RVN few days before surrendering the country to the communists in 30 April 1975.

26. General Duong Van Minh in an interview with the French Journalist Jean Lacouture, see Jean Lacouture, Vietnam: Between Two Truces, Korad Kellen & Joel Carmichael (trans.), Secker & Warburg, London, 1966, p.128.

Minister Nguyen Khanh in 1965, and was transformed into the Revolutionary Program in 1966 by Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky.<sup>27</sup> The latter programme could only be implemented in 28 980 out of a total of 15,000 existing hamlets. Again, it was a failure.

#### 3.4. Diem's Fall

One significant point at this juncture was that while Ho Chi Minh's DRV was clearly scheming towards the reunification of Vietnam, the RVN under Diem seemed to be contented with the division -- the question of unification was certainly not a priority in the national policy of the RVN.<sup>29</sup> Diem's over-reliance on the military to defeat the DRV aggression instead of relying on mass-support, isolated his administration from the people. The repressive methods used, and the increasing US intervention clearly contributed to the hostility against his administration.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, more than 80% of the

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27. The Revolutionary Development Program differed from its predecessors as it did not attempt to relocate villages. See Harvey Smith, et al., South Vietnam Area Handbook, The American University, Washington D. C., 1967, p.232.

28. Ibid.

29. The goal of reunifying the country however, was never abandoned by Diem and the successive regimes.

30. For a detailed study on the Diem Regime, see Robert Scigliani, South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1963.



total American aid went into building the army, sustaining the administration, and financing the many secret services and security forces that the regime needed to keep itself in power against mounting discontent.

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Diem's nepotism allowed his brother Nhu and his wife to take matters into their own hands. Madame Nhu's initiation of moral upliftment programmes, and the persecution of the non-Catholic religious groups contributed further to civil discontent. Ngo Dinh Nhu formed the Can Lao Party (Personalist Labor Party) a secret organization which he led autocratically, and which was "engaged chiefly in spying on and intimidating officials, army officers, and prominent private citizens suspected of lacking enthusiasm for the regime." 33 The regime's discrimination against the Buddhists sparked off mass protests and demonstrations by Buddhist monks and students, thus further aggravating the situation.

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31. Joseph Buttinger, A Dragon Defiant : A Short History of Vietnam, Praeger Publisher, New York, 1972, p.94

32. Ngo Dinh Nhu (1910-1963) was the younger brother of President Ngo Dinh Diem and Minister of the Interior in Diem's regime. Son of Ngo Dinh Kha, an influential figure at the imperial court, Nhu was educated in France and eventually became active as an organizer of the Catholic Labour Union movement, and the Vietnamese Federation of Christian Workers. The driving force behind the Diem regime, he was also an advisor and organizer of Diem's secret Can Lao party, which was mainly responsible for ridding the regime of its enemies. He was killed with Diem on 2 November 1963.

33. Buttinger, op.cit., p.95.

Buttinger was of the opinion that:

...even early American supporters of Diem regarding him as an answer to the attraction Ho Chi Minh exercised on the Vietnamese people, finally had to admit that the Saigon Regime was a repressive and politically ineffective

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police state.

As days passed by, the nationalist appeal of Diem lost its flavour with the presence of foreign military intervention,<sup>35</sup> considered as imperialist by the Vietnamese masses. The unclear stand by Diem's regime on the reunification of Vietnam also further alienated his administration from mass support. Thus, without strong support, the RVN was more than happy with the various assistance rendered by the Malayan Government. Malaya was little aware that the various forms of assistance given to South Vietnam would hardly contribute to the survival of an unpopular regime.

President Ngo Dinh Diem was assassinated on 2 November 1963 together with his brother Nhu in the midst of a coup d'etat staged by his increasingly discontented

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34. Buttinger, op.cit., pp.95-96. This view was shared by French scholar George Chaffard, Indochine: Dix ans d'indépendance, Paris, 1964; and American scholar Robert Shaplen, The Lost Revolution: The US in Vietnam, 1946-1966, Andre Deutsch, London, 1966.

35. The strength of US military advisors in Vietnam at the time of Diem's death totalled 15,000 -- a more than threefold increase from the 1962 figure of 4,000.

generals, led by General Duong Van Minh. The coup resulted in the establishment of a provisional government with former Vice-President Nguyen Ngoc Tho as the head of state, supported by a military Junta led by General Minh. The government was quick to declare its anti-communist stand. In an interview by Jean Lacouture, General Minh confirmed the RVN's anti-communist stand, but stated however that it "...will confine our activities strictly to South Vietnam,...have not the slightest intention of engaging in reconquest or crusade,...."<sup>36</sup> General Minh's anti-communist stand however was sufficient for the RVN to win for itself support from the western and pro-west countries including Malaysia.

Thus, it would appear that Malaya's support for the RVN was based on one fundamental consideration -- that the RVN remained firm in its fight against the communists. As long as it did so, Malaya seemed to be willing to accept the several regimes which were to succeed one after another in the aftermath of the fall of Diem. General Minh's regime was deposed by a military junta led by

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36. Jean Lacouture, op.cit., p.128.

General Nguyen Khanh on 30 January 1964. The military Junta's take over did not however bring about the very much needed reforms to the masses and at the same time, there was no clear programme of social concern by the government. The prevailing apathy facilitated Viet-Cong propaganda in penetrating the masses and in urging them to rise against the RVN Government -- a factor that played a critical role in later developments. The Junta's pledges to carry on its anti-communist struggle won recognition from the Malaysian Government.<sup>39</sup> Thus it was clear that Malaysia was prepared to recognise any form of government in Saigon as long as it played a part in deterring the communist advance into Southeast Asia. For its part, the RVN was more than obliged to accept aid from friendly nations to sustain its political survival and to remain steadfastly anti-communist.

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37. General Nguyen Khanh was a General in the ARVN and head of the "Young Turks" movement that took power in Saigon in January 1964; was deputy chief of staff under the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem and led a coup against the senior officers under General Duong Van Minh. Khanh was ousted from power in February 1965.
38. Between the fall of the Diem regime on 1 November 1963 and 19 June 1965 when Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky and General Nguyen Van Thieu took over from Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat, the RVN Government was changed eight times through various political changes and coups. These changes occurred on: 30 January 1964; 8 February 1964; 16 August 1964; 27 August 1964; 3 September 1964; 26 October 1964; 27 January 1965; and 16 February 1965.
39. The Times, 5 August 1964.

### 3.5. US Official Intervention in the Vietnam War

On 2 August 1964, the USS Maddox was allegedly attacked by DRV torpedo boats off the shore of North Vietnam. This incident was followed two days later by another similar attack on the USS C. Turner Joy, resulting in the Tongkin Gulf Crisis which directly set the stage for official US involvement in Vietnam. Prior to the crisis, US involvement was kept at a low level -- that of a mere military tactical advisory role. However with the outbreak of the Tongkin Crisis, US involvement escalated and American troops began to take over the fighting in Vietnam. US intervention was made possible through the passing of the Tongkin Resolution<sup>40</sup> which gave the President special powers and discretion to intervene in Vietnam.

The US engagement in Vietnam though condemned by the DRV and its mentors, however gained support from the West and Pro-west nations. Malaysia condemned the DRV action; a spokesman of the Malaysian Ministry of External Affairs said that the attack on the two destroyers was a deliberate act of provocation to test America's strength

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40. See "The Gulf of Tongkin Resolution, 7 August 1964", Gareth Porter (ed), Vietnam: The Definite Documentation of Human Decisions, Vol.2, Earl M. Coleman Enterprises Inc., Publisher, New York, 1979, p.307.

and patience in meeting the crisis. Tunku reacted by giving his total approval of the US bombardment of the DRV cities and in time offered Malaysia as one of the refit and recreational centres for US servicemen serving in Vietnam. The Tunku sent a message to President Johnson supporting the US action against the DRV:

I wish to endorse wholeheartedly the action taken by you and your government in carrying out these fitting measures in retaliation against unjustified attacks on US vessels in international waters.... A small nation like Malaysia, which is bent on peace, feels greatly encouraged by the fitting action of

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the US Government.

The Tunku reaffirmed his support for the US action in Vietnam a year later by further saying:

Some countries consider American participation to help defend Vietnam was wrong, but in what other way can Vietnam defend herself except to call

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upon friendly powers to help her.

Even with the growing complexity of the Vietnam war, it can be assumed that Vietnam-Malaysia relations up to 1964 were cordial and Vietnam looked toward Malaysia with hope for greater assistance while the Malaysian Government hoped to maintain the status-quo in Vietnam for its security purposes.

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41. The Times, 5 August 1964.

42. The Saigon Post, 4 May 1965.

The Vietnam war escalated further without much progress at the negotiating table; various conferences held resulted in no concrete steps towards a peaceful settlement in Vietnam. The Cultural Revolution in China (1964-1969) which limited Chinese support for the DRV did not erode its determination for reunification. During the course of the Cultural Revolution, which Hanoi leaders viewed with contempt, attention was shifted towards Moscow<sup>43</sup> for supporting the DRV war effort.

### 3.6. Confrontation and Vietnam-Malaysia Relations

A Confrontation was launched by President Sukarno of Indonesia against Malaysia in the midst of the formation<sup>44</sup> of Malaysia. It was launched in protest against the incorporation of the territories of Sabah and Sarawak into Malaysia. K. S. Nathan has argued that Sukarno's world view was more determined by the ideological struggle between the New Emerging Forces (NEFOS) and the Old

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43. For a good study on Vietnam's stand between China and the Soviet Union between 1960-1975, see Douglas Pike, Vietnam and the Soviet Union, Anatomy of an Alliance, Westview Press, Boulder, 1987, chapter 4-6.

44. For a detailed study on Confrontation, see J. A. C. Mackie, Konfrontasi: The Indonesia-Malaysia Dispute 1963-1966, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1974. See also Arnold C. Brackman, Southeast Asia's Second Front, The Power Struggle in the Malay Archipelago, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1966.

Established Forces (OLDEFOS). He further stated that, in opposing the idea of a larger federation incorporating Malaya, Singapore, Sabah (North Borneo), Sarawak and Brunei, Sukarno claimed leadership of NEFOS while condemning the Tunku as collaborator of the old colonial order (OLDEFOS) in Southeast Asia.<sup>46</sup> Being a member of the Commonwealth, and a party to AMDA, Malaysia received strong support from the Commonwealth countries especially Britain and Australia. At the same time Malaysia's military commitments, especially to the UN peace-keeping force in the Congo, and its aid to the RVN ended in time to enable it to deal fully with the Indonesian threat.

The Confrontation was viewed rather seriously by the US administration. Robert F. Kennedy, then the US Attorney General, felt that the conflict between Malaysia and Indonesia may touch off a major war that will involve other countries including the US. Kennedy<sup>47</sup> believed that such a war would be far more serious than what was going on in Vietnam in which the US was already involved. Thus,

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45. NEFOS refers to the newly independent countries of the third world, while OLDEFOS refers to the western colonial powers. See K. S. Nathan, "Nationalism and Foreign Policy: A Case Study of Indonesia Under Sukarno", NUSANTARA, Vol.10, January 1983, p.43.

46. K. S. Nathan, "Vision 2020: Implications for Malaysian Foreign Policy", Asian Defence Journal, January 1992, p.6.

47. The Saigon Post, 16 February 1964.



for the US the whole conflict has to be avoided in order not to jeopardize the situation in Vietnam. The RVN realising that Confrontation would have the effect of limiting support for its struggle against the communists, hoped for an early settlement of the conflict.<sup>48</sup>

The Confrontation policy against Malaysia had two implications for the Vietnam war especially for the RVN. The withdrawal of all overseas military commitments by Malaysia included the Ibans and Aborigine trackers attached to the RVN forces, and also the cessation of miscellaneous assistance, though minimum in the context of contribution to the RVN war effort. The RVN however had a different view. Major General Tran Thien Khiem, the Minister of Defence of RVN made a request to Malaysia in July 1964, said that his country "would like Malaysia to second some of its famed Aborigine trackers to assist in the war against the Viet Cong guerillas."<sup>49</sup> The trackers were withdrawn earlier at the outbreak of Confrontation. At the same time General Khiem requested Tun Abdul Razak, then the Malaysian Minister of Defence, for facilities to train in Malaysia, Vietnamese troops in jungle warfare. Despite its conflict with Indonesia, Malaysia was training more than 2,000 Vietnamese counter-insurgency troops in

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48. The Saigon Post, 29 June 1964.

49. The Times, 28 July 1964.

Secondly, the confrontation limited Britain's support for the RVN. Unlike the US and Australia, Britain although a SEATO member, was unwilling to commit itself in the Vietnam war except in the form of "administrative advice and technical aid" including training of Vietnamese armed forces personnel.<sup>51</sup> The Confrontation gave Britain a good reason to avoid commitment in Vietnam as Britain was obligated to the defense of Malaya and Malaysia under the AMDA.<sup>52</sup> thus denying the RVN of greater military aid from Britain.

Nevertheless, all these developments did not in any way jeopardize Vietnam-Malaysia relations, as during the period from 1963-1965, the RVN itself was experiencing a series of successive short-lived governments that diverted its attention from international politics save for its concern for support in its war effort. In October 1965, after taking over the Saigon Government together with General Nguyen Van Thieu, earlier in June, Prime Minister

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50. Ibid.

51. The Times, 5 May 1965. See also The Saigon Post, 24 June 1964.

52. Leszek Buszynski, SEATO: The Failure of an Alliance Strategy, Singapore University Press, Singapore, 1983, p.120. See The Times, 11 February, and 18 February 1965. See also The Saigon Post, 24 June 1965.

Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky paid a 4 day official visit to Malaysia. Prime Minister Ky regarded his visit as important as it would strengthen friendship between Vietnam and Malaysia, one of the Southeast Asian countries which fought against communism.<sup>53</sup> During the visit, General Ky conveyed to Malaysia the gratitude of the Vietnamese people for the valuable assistance and moral support given to the RVN in their struggle against communists. He also further asked for Malaysia's aid in sparing more material assistance in the war against the Viet Cong. At the same time Ky raised with the Malaysian leadership, the question of forming a military alliance of Asian countries which opposed communism.<sup>54</sup> Although the proposal was not unveiled during the visit, it materialised in the form of ASPAC (Asian and Pacific Council) a year later, in 1966. The organization, proposed by Japan and backed by the US was joined by the RVN and Malaysia together with 6 other nations.<sup>55</sup> ASPAC aimed at regional cooperation in countering the communist threat, though on a lower scale. On Confrontation, Ky pledged that Vietnam will stand by Malaysia in defense of its freedom. He said:

In case of any overt attack on this country, I'm sure we can share some of

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53. The Saigon Post, 5 October 1965.

54. The Times, 5 October 1965.

55. ASPAC members were: Japan, Australia, Thailand, New Zealand, the Philippines, Malaysia, the Republic of Vietnam, the Republic of China on Taiwan, and South Korea.

our personnel and equipment for  
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Malaysia's defense.

In the Joint Vietnam-Malaysia-Communique issued at the end of Ky's visit, Tunku Abdul Rahman assured the RVN of Malaysia's "continued support in Vietnam's valiant  
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struggle to free herself from militant communism."

The DRV on the other hand condemned the formation of Malaysia and expressed its support for the Indonesian "Crush Malaysia" plan. In a report in 1964 to a special / political conference on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the communist victory of Dien Bien Phu, President Ho Chi Minh declared:

We unreservedly support the Indonesian people who under the leadership of President Sukarno, are resolutely fighting against Malaysia, a creation of the imperialists who want to maintain their privilege and interests in Southeast Asia and to have a springboard for attack against the national liberation movement in this area. The imperialists' maneuvers are, however, consigned to failure, while the Indonesian people's just struggle  
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will certainly end in victory."

Earlier, the Vietnamese official Daily Nhan Dan [People's Daily] also accused the British of "savagely persecuting

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56. The Saigon Post, 16 October 1965.

57. The Saigon Post, 8 October 1965.

58. Ho Chi Minh as quoted in Arnold C. Brackman, Southeast Asia's Second Front, The Power Struggle in the Malay Archipelago, Federick A. Praeger, New York, 1966, p.284.

the people of Brunei, Sarawak, and North Borneo" and declared that the "Vietnamese people heartily support their struggle."<sup>59</sup>

Hanoi's stand unmistakably manifested its hostile attitude towards Malaysia which it considered as a neo-colonialist plot by British imperialism. Hanoi's support for Indonesian's Confrontation programme derived mainly from two considerations:

- 1) Sukarno's Confrontation policy which was largely influenced by the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI), a sister party to the Vietnamese Communist party.
- 2) Like the DRV, the Indonesians achieved their independence through bloodshed and armed struggle, and are in the anti-imperialist camp, termed by Sukarno as the Djakarta-Phnom Penh-Hanoi-Peking-Pyongyang axis.<sup>60</sup>

Hanoi's role in hosting the International Conference for Solidarity With The Vietnamese People Against United States Imperialists and for the Defense of Peace in November 1965 demonstrated its sense of common anti-imperialist bondage.<sup>61</sup>

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59. Nhan Dan, 27 December 1962, as quoted in Arnold Brackman, op.cit., p.150.

60. Sukarno's speech on 17 August Independence Day 1965 as quoted in Brackman, op.cit., p.266.

61. A Malayan, Tahir bin Muhamad attended the conference as the representative of the Malayan National Liberation League. Speaking at the conference, Tahir linked the anti-Malaysia struggle and the Viet Cong struggle as common goals. See Brackman, op.cit., p.284.

Besides moral support, Hanoi did not render any other  
form of assistance to Sukarno's campaign.<sup>62</sup> It was probable  
that the DRV was too preoccupied with the struggle of the  
Viet Cong in South Vietnam. Furthermore, at this time the  
DRV itself was depending on foreign aid for its own  
survival and struggle, especially when the US had just  
begun to commit American ground troops to South Vietnam.

Nevertheless, it was clear that the Indonesian  
Confrontation against Malaysia further deepened Hanoi's  
suspicions, if not, enmity towards Malaysia. For  
Malaysia's part, Tunku Abdul Rahman preferred to regard  
the Indonesian threat as part of the Djakarta-Phnom Penh-  
Hanoi-Peking-Pyongyang Axis scheme to dominate Asia.<sup>63</sup>  
Thus, DRV-Malaysia relations in the early sixties were  
characterised by mutual suspicions and antagonism.

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62. In fact Brackman pointed out that after the initial  
demonstration of support for Indonesia in 1962-63,  
both Moscow and Peking hardly took notice of  
Malaysia, even at the height of Confrontation. See  
Brackman, op.cit., p.90.

63. The Times, 4 June 1965.

### 3.7. Formation of ASEAN and Vietnam-Malaysia Relations

The period since Ky's visit to Kuala Lumpur in 1965 until 1967 was characterized by the escalation of US military commitment in Vietnam against the Viet Cong and the DRV Armed Forces whose infiltration into the RVN, reached a critical level. By then, the US military strength in the RVN had escalated from 181,000 in December 1965 to 385,000 in 1966 and to 486,000 in 1967.<sup>64</sup> The strategic bombing of North Vietnam began on 12 April 1966 and Premier Ky's government relied more and more on the US, and at the same time appealed for greater support from pro-west and anti-communist countries.

While the Malaysian Government was supportive of the US intervention in Vietnam, anti-US demonstrations were staged on 30 June 1966 in Kuala Lumpur and several other towns protesting and condemning American "aggression" in Vietnam and urged the government to "check out" American soldiers spending their leave in Malaysia.<sup>65</sup> Anti-US demonstrations were staged again in October 1966 in conjunction with the visit of President Johnson to Malaysia. A crowd stormed the US Information Service

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64. Ray Bond (ed), The Vietnam War: The Illustrated History of the Conflict in Southeast Asia, Salamader Books, London, 1979, p.217.

65. The Times, 1 July 1966.

Centre in Kuala Lumpur resulting in one death after police opened fire on the crowd. Nevertheless, Tunku Abdul Rahman reaffirmed Malaysia's full support for US actions in Vietnam. He told President Johnson that the US could not do less than it was doing to bring North Vietnam to the negotiating table.<sup>66</sup>

The Bangkok Declaration of 6 August 1967 created the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), comprising of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.<sup>67</sup> ASEAN was successor to both ASA and MAPHILINDO,<sup>68</sup> and offered a broader framework for mutual cooperation among member countries with emphasis on regional economic cooperation and social stability.<sup>69</sup> Although strategic and military aspects were not part of the original purpose, nonetheless the association was

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66. The Times, 31 October 1966.

67. ASA (Association of Southeast Asia) formed in 1961 comprised of Malaya, Thailand and the Philippines with emphasis in the area of social and cultural exchange among member countries.

68. MAPHILINDO was a loose ethno-cultural association comprising Malaya, Indonesia, and the Philippines, and first proposed in 1962 by President Macapagal of the Philippines. The association collapsed in the wake of conflicting ideological perspectives and territorial claims respectively in Jakarta and Manila in the form of Confrontation and the Philippine claim on Sabah. For a good work on MAPHILINDO, see Arnold C. Brackman, op.cit., Chapter 15, pp.178-192.

69. For text of the ASEAN Declaration, see Appendix One of M. Rajendran, ASEAN's Foreign Relations: The Shift Towards Collective Action, Arenabuku Sdn. Bhd., Kuala Lumpur, 1986.



formed partly because of the Vietnam war, particularly the threat from the DRV, it was not a critical reason for the establishment of ASEAN, as the ASEAN states still perceived the Americans as being deeply committed to the containment of communism in Indochina.<sup>70</sup>

For Malaysia, its membership in ASEAN was largely prompted by its desire to overcome its political differences with the Philippines over Sabah and to establish a new relationship with the Suharto regime in Indonesia in the aftermath of Confrontation. The fear of the expansion of the Vietnam conflict to Malaysia however was not an urgent consideration for Malaysia compared to Thailand, which was situated nearest to Vietnam. On the other hand, response from the two Vietnams was obvious.

The DRV perceived ASEAN as part of the American imperialist scheme, and therefore was hostile to the association, especially towards Thailand and the Philippines which were also members of SEATO. Furthermore Malaysia, being a member also helped in the counter-insurgency training of the ARVN and the RVN police personnel. The Saigon regime welcomed the formation of ASEAN, looking at it as another alternative for greater support in its war against the DRV onslaught. ASEAN

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70. This view was expressed by M. Rajendran, op.cit., p.20.

subsequently was to play a very important role in Vietnam-Malaysia relations as many bilateral relations between the two countries were conducted within the broader context in ASEAN -- a subject to be discussed later.

### 3.8. Peace Conference and Shift in International Politics

The year 1968 started with a big 'bang' in the Vietnam war as the Viet Cong launched the 'Tet' offensive in late January to take over South Vietnam from the Saigon Thieu-Ky Regime.<sup>71</sup> The year also witnessed the total escalation of US troops in the RVN, swelling to a ceiling of 536,100 personnel. However the most significant development was US and North Vietnamese efforts to negotiate an end to the Vietnam war -- an initiative that was reassuring to Malaysia, although the massive military disengagement from Southeast Asia was not. On 3 May 1968, President Johnson accepted a North Vietnamese offer to

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71. The 'Tet' offensive was a major military offensive and general uprising launched by the revolutionary forces in South Vietnam during the traditional lunar new year holiday in 1968. Aimed at shaking the stability of the Saigon regime and undermining public support for the war effort in the United States, it began on 31 January 1968 with a series of attacks on Saigon and other major cities and towns. The PLAF were supported by the PAVN. Although strategically it failed to achieve its objective, the offensive which lasted more than two weeks resulted in a serious erosion of American public confidence in the US war effort, and led eventually to the reduction of US force levels in the RVN.

conduct preliminary peace discussions in Paris.

The negotiations were held in the context of a visible shift in international politics. The refusal of President Johnson to seek reelection paved the way for the rise of President Richard Nixon whose political platform was to bring back the US troops from Vietnam. In line with these developments, the US was also moving towards rapprochement with China, as indicated by Nixon's 1967 article in Foreign Affairs.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand the Soviet Union was scheming to move closer to the DRV. The Asian Collective Security idea proposed a year later by Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev was aimed at wooing ASEAN's support against China. Diplomatic relations were established by Malaysia with the Soviet Union in 1967 with the aim of exercising greater diplomatic flexibility in international relations in the wake of possible major shifts in the regional and global balance of power.

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72. The Paris Peace talks did not reach a conclusion until January 1973, after four more years of war.

73. See, Richard M. Nixon, "Asia After Viet Nam", Foreign Affairs, Vol.46, No.1, October 1967, pp.111-125.

### 3.9. Conclusion

Vietnam-Malaysia relations during 1957-1969 were clearly determined by the strong consideration of anti-communism as well as the balance of power in regional and global politics. Cordial relations between the RVN and Malaysia prevailed as both were anti-communist. On the other hand, DRV-Malaysia relations were non-existent as both held opposing ideologies in the context of the Cold war, which dictated their respective policies of hostility towards each other. The dramatic changes that occurred in the late sixties especially after the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969 were bound to impact upon Vietnam-Malaysia relations, as well be discussed in the next chapter.