Malaysia and the Cold War

HARI SINGH

There can be no half-way policy. Either we go all out and sink with Democracy, or with Communism if we support Communism. (Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1962)

The statement above aptly describes Malaysia's foreign policy in the decade following independence in 1957. Malaysia took sides in the Cold War, aligning itself with the West against the communist powers. Non-alignment was treated with contempt. In this regard, it is interesting to ask why would a country like Malaysia, a minor power in world politics, adopt a partisan approach in the East-West conflict when there were no credible threats to its external security from the communist powers? Did Malaysia's policymakers not realize that by choosing to align itself with the Western bloc, the country would have little room for manoeuvre in its foreign policy, given the constraints posed by bipolar politics? Surely the decision-making elite would also have been aware that alignment with the West in a Cold War climate would complicate Malaysia's relationship with its neighbours in South-east Asia, given that the political dynamics of a regional subsystem are not necessarily congruent with those of the dominant system. Moreover, the demands generated by a country's domestic environment are often at variance with the aspirations of its political leadership in the realm of foreign policy. Thus why did Malaysian decision-makers opt for a close, though informal, alliance with the United States? How did they manage to reconcile the competing global, regional and domestic factors impinging on the country's foreign policy? Answers to these questions are crucial to the understanding of Malaysia's diplomacy during the Cold War.
The analysis of Malaysia's foreign policy during this period may be divided into two phases: rabid anti-communism (1957-62) and limited rapprochement with the communist powers (1963-67). While the demarcation of these phases is, ultimately, arbitrary, it nevertheless serves as a convenient divide here. With regard to the communist countries, emphasis will be placed on the Soviet Union, China and Vietnam. Leaving aside the fact that other communist countries had negligible influence in Malaysian politics, the choice of these adds further complexity to the analysis given their respective ranks as superpower, great power and near-medium power in the hierarchy of power in the international system, Malaysia itself being a small power.\(^5\) Finally, the Cold War here will be taken to cover the period 1957-67, the earlier date coinciding with Malaysia's independence and the latter preceding the transition towards global detente. Moreover, from around 1968 onwards, Malaysia's foreign policy registered a distinct change in its form and content.\(^6\)

**Containment, 1957-62**

The taking of sides in the Cold War manifested itself in the courses of action Malaysia adopted in the international system immediately after independence. At the bilateral level, 'non-cooperation' characterized Malaysia's attitude towards the communist countries, notwithstanding the fact that the latter were among the first to recognize the new nation.\(^7\) In contrast, Malaysia's first diplomatic missions were established in Western and other Commonwealth countries.\(^8\) Thus, at the outset, a recurring pattern of behaviour emerged in Malaysia's international interactions which may be described as pro-Western and anti-communist in orientation.

In the global context, it is significant that between 1959 and 1960, Malaysia registered the highest coincidence in voting pattern with the United States in the United Nations General Assembly.\(^9\) The UN itself served as a valuable instrument of Malaysian foreign policy. From 1959 until 1961, Malaysia co-sponsored the Tibetan resolution in the General Assembly to alert the world to the danger posed by communism.\(^10\) Likewise, in 1960, Malaysia was decidedly against a Soviet proposal for a 'troika' secretary-generalship comprising
representatives from the Western, communist and neutralist blocs; neutral nations were regarded as allies of communism.\textsuperscript{11} In a similar vein, Kuala Lumpur chose to interpret its participation in the UN Emergency Force in the Congolese civil war in 1960 not so much as part of a peacekeeping role as a means to contain communist expansionism in Africa.\textsuperscript{12}

At the regional level, Malaysia took the lead in developing interlocking alliances among anti-communist states in South-east Asia to supplement Western containment strategy in Asia. In 1959, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman canvassed for the formation of the 'Southeast Asian Friendship and Economic Treaty' (SEAFET) as a forum for regional co-operation. While the forum was to be 'non-political', it was also apparent that 'his major concern was to develop a program to forestall the Communist movement in Southeast Asia...by increasing the economic well-being in the area'.\textsuperscript{13} Likewise, the Association of South-east Asia (ASA), launched in 1961, comprised Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines, the latter two being staunch anti-communist allies of the United States.\textsuperscript{14} Influenced by the tenets of the 'domino theory' and in line with American policy, Malaysia, despite its limited resources, began to furnish military aid, especially counterinsurgency expertise, to South Vietnam in an effort to stem the southward expansion of communism at the seventeenth parallel.\textsuperscript{15}

To be sure, ties were established with non-aligned countries such as Egypt, India, Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Indonesia. Underlying these links, however, were other more important considerations, particularly geographic proximity as in the case of South-east Asian countries, and the transnational ties of ethnicity, culture and religion with regard to Egypt and India. But, on the whole, Malaysia had minimal contact with the majority of the non-aligned nations, especially in Africa. At first glance, it would appear that lack of resources, especially skilled manpower and finance, may have accounted for a newly-independent country such as Malaysia paying less attention to these countries. In reality, the ideological premise in Malaysian foreign policy was the more convincing reason. As the Tunku was to remind his people:

\begin{quote}
Between right and wrong, there is no neutrality and the
Federation of Malaya has no desire to share the fate of Humpty Dumpty who sat on the Wall.\textsuperscript{16}

It is obvious that a neutral posture in world affairs offended the morals of the Malaysian leadership, and contempt for these nations limited the prospects for greater diversification in the country's diplomatic representation overseas.

In explaining Malaysia's foreign policy in the immediate aftermath of its independence, it is imperative that we begin by examining the idiosyncrasies of its key decision-maker. As T. H. Silcock has written, Malaysia's foreign policy 'owes more to the personality of its Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, than is usual even in foreign policies of new states'.\textsuperscript{17} Like John Foster Dulles', the Tunku's image of the communist countries was 'built on the trinity of atheism, totalitarianism, and communism, capped by a deep belief that no enduring social order could be erected upon such foundations'.\textsuperscript{18} Such philosophical beliefs made a clear distinction between the forces of 'good' and 'evil': 'democracy', generally associated with the non-communist systems and the West, was 'good' and was superior to the 'devilish and sinister' nature of communism;\textsuperscript{19} communism was nothing more than 'dictatorship'.\textsuperscript{20} The Tunku's philosophical beliefs in turn influenced his instrumental beliefs.\textsuperscript{21} Given Malaysia's limited power, it was perfectly legitimate for Malaysia to ally itself with other 'democratic' nations, especially those in the West which possessed superior capabilities, to contain communism. The Tunku believed that 'determined and definite opposition' by the West, as in the case of the Cuban missile crisis and the Berlin blockade, would make the communists 'back down'.\textsuperscript{22}

Generally speaking, the Tunku had a closed image of his enemy, that is, an outlook that was not too sensitive to external change.\textsuperscript{23} Yet, from the second half of the 1950s, it was becoming increasingly clear that distinct changes had occurred in Soviet foreign policy, underlined by the policy of peaceful coexistence and limited thaw with the West. However, the Tunku interpreted peaceful coexistence as 'a fraud designed to reduce into a state of non-existence those trapped victims'.\textsuperscript{24}

What contributed to the Malaysian Prime Minister's predisposition in international politics? To begin with, the Tunku's
experience with local communism greatly moulded his thinking on world politics. As he stated in 1960:

Having experienced the menace of communism and overcome it, we are particularly sensitive to its threats elsewhere and have never hesitated to take a positive stand when necessary.\textsuperscript{25}

In 1948, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) launched its revolution with the express purpose of freeing Malaysia from colonial rule. The contest for power between the MCP on the one hand and the British and their Malay allies on the other lasted for almost 12 years, a period euphemistically referred to as the 'Emergency'.\textsuperscript{26} Given that the MCP was overwhelmingly Chinese in composition, the communist revolt was regarded as a challenge to indigenous political power. In the long run, the Emergency left an indelible scar on the Malay mind, in particular on the evolving political elite which was later to take control over the new nation's political process. Recalling his meeting in 1955 with the leader of the MCP, the Tunku was convinced that 'their ideology and ours cannot exist side by side'.\textsuperscript{27} So long as the government perceived the local communists to be a threat to its power, ties with them were impracticable. The local communist threat, the Tunku believed, was part and parcel of 'international communism'; formal links with the communist countries would open the 'floodgates' of communism into the country.\textsuperscript{28} Countries that had 'suffered as a result of militant communism', such as South Vietnam and South Korea, were sought after for their friendship in the early stages of Malaysia's independence.\textsuperscript{29}

Mention must also be made of the Tunku's affinity for the West. To a considerable degree, this was moulded by the colonial experience. The Tunku was a member of the aristocratic class with whom the British had forged an amicable relationship - partly to facilitate control over the masses, but also because the British generally liked the Malays and often sided with them in disputes involving the immigrant communities.\textsuperscript{30} The Tunku was himself educated in Britain and had developed a great admiration for Western institutions and customs. As a result, he was regarded not only as the 'quintessential Malay' but also as an 'English gentleman'.\textsuperscript{31}
Thus Malaysia's alignment with the West in the Cold War was not only the result of the Tunku's anti-communist ethos, but was also influenced by his general pro-Western orientation.

To be sure, the Tunku was not the only person responsible for the formulation of foreign policy. He was part of a larger decision-making elite comprising, among others, the Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak; the Minister of Home Affairs, Tun Dr. Ismail; and the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie. However, the other members of the elite shared the Tunku's world view. Like him, they were staunchly anti-communist and pro-Western in their orientation, in part because of their aristocratic backgrounds, but also because of their education.

Nevertheless, there were subtle shades of difference in their approaches to foreign policy, in particular the views of Tun Ismail, head of the powerful Ministry of Home Affairs, who was also briefly Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1959 and 1960. He explained to parliament in 1961:

> We are anti-communist not because the Western countries are anti-communist. We are anti-communist because by experience we know that they are trying to destroy us.

This statement attempted to distance Malaysia from the global East-West conflict. Indeed, Tun Ismail insisted in informing the world that, while 'We never claim ourselves to be neutral', Malaysia was 'not aligned'. He added: 'We are not committed to any power bloc and we crystallize our attitude on any issue strictly on merit in the light of our national interest'. But given Malaysia's record in its external relations, such non-aligned sentiment had a muted impact on policy formulation. This was largely due to the fact that the Tunku's views were more influential in the decision-making process. As the chief decision-maker he defined the situation. Moreover, his royal status and his charisma, in addition to his position as the Prime Minister, reinforced his dominance of the policy-making elite.

Although the Tunku's personality and powerbase gave him great latitude within the decision-making elite, it must be remembered that foreign policy is not made in isolation but in a socio-political setting. In this connection, mention must first be made of the bureaucratic
input into decision-making. At the time when the initial shape of Malaysian foreign policy was determined, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself was institutionally underdeveloped, with limited manpower and with no intelligence apparatus. As a result of a poor communication network and a weak advocacy structure in the establishment, the leadership often seemed to resort to stereotypes in interpreting the behaviour of other states, especially communist states. Even if there had been bureaucratic input of any significance in the decision-making process, the fact remains that the ideological orientation of the senior bureaucrats was strikingly similar to that of the national leadership.

Decision-making was also insulated from the pressures generated by the domestic environment. To some extent this was the function of a plural society. The requirements of ethnic accommodation had resulted in the adoption of a consociational model where the masses placed their faith in and allowed great autonomy to the communal elites in decision-making. In any case, the masses themselves had little knowledge about the complexities involved in foreign policy-making, which, in any event, was shrouded in a cloak of secrecy.

The masses may have been little informed about foreign policy matters, but this is not to say that they were totally ignorant about the broader issues. In fact, public opinion, expressed through political parties, sought to influence the direction of Malaysia's foreign policy towards a non-aligned course, including normalization of relations with the communist countries. Parti Islam, representing in terms of the popular vote about a quarter of the Malay population, sought the disentanglement of Malaysia's relationship with the West and advocated a neutral posture in world affairs. Likewise, Parti Rakyat, representing the Malay left, called for the abolition of pacts and sought closer ties with the Afro-Asian countries. The main challengers to the Chinese component in the government, the Labour Party, the United Democratic Party and the People's Progressive Party, clamoured for the elimination of foreign bases and the establishment of friendly ties with the communist countries. But the feeling of invulnerability arising from the government's overwhelming majority in parliament and its recourse to the instruments of preventive detention to paralyse the opposition made the ruling elite less susceptible to public sentiment. In any case, other factors tended to
outweigh the merits of the opposition's views on foreign affairs.

Reinforcing the role of elite ideology in Malaysia's decision to side with the West in the Cold War were considerations of national power. At the time of independence, Malaysia had only one battalion of men under arms. This fact, in the light of the Cold War climate, the insurgency at home, and a conscious policy to divert valuable funds into development, led Malaysia to conclude the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement in 1957. Given that three of its component parties, namely, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, were members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), Malaysia had indirectly placed itself in the ambit of the American containment system in Asia. Similarly, close ties with the West were bonded by economic considerations. Malaysia's capitalist-based, primary-producing economy relied on the West for finance capital, technological expertise and markets. Moreover, it was estimated that in the first years after independence, 'all the tin-dredges, three-quarters of the large rubber estates, almost all the new oil palm estates, possibly two-thirds of Malayan foreign trade, and much of the new secondary industries are in overseas, mainly British, ownership and control'. Dependence on the West for its security and economic needs provided the West with important leverage in charting the course of Malaysia's foreign policy.

It must be emphasized, however, that Malaysia's attitude towards the communist powers was not wholly a function of Cold War politics. Mention must be made of the unassimilated Chinese community in Malaysia, which then comprised about 37 per cent of the population. Generally well respected by all the communities in Malaysia, the Tunku is nevertheless on record of having made the following remark on the local Chinese:

"The unfortunate part of it all is that a large number or section of the community who are enjoying the privileges and amenities of this country are downright disloyal." The Chinese nature of the communist revolt and the pro-China bias in the curricula of local Chinese schools may have coloured the Tunku's views on the loyalty of the Chinese community. Nevertheless, the government favoured a policy of insulating the
local Chinese from China's influence in its nation-building strategy, and the anti-communist policy served its purpose in this regard.

Although Malaysia had placed itself squarely on the side of the West in the Cold War, it was constrained by regional and domestic considerations. Largely because of geographical proximity, Malaysia was cautious in not offending the Asian communist powers too much. This largely explains why the official vituperation was directed more towards the Soviet Union, a distant power, than towards China and Vietnam. The deference paid to the Asian communist powers could also be seen from the fact that Malaysia decided against formal membership of SEATO in spite of the Tunku's inclination. The sensitivity of neutral neighbours such as Indonesia and Cambodia also constrained the government's position on SEATO. Moreover, not only were the local Chinese against such an alliance, but cross-sections of the Malay and Indian communities, influenced by Sukarno and Nehru, were also unfavourably disposed to the idea.

The conciliatory streak in Malaysia's policy towards the Asian communist powers clearly manifested itself in the decision in 1960 to recognize China. Although geographical proximity was a crucial determinant in this decision, domestic imperatives were also important in pushing Malaysia in the same direction. In the first place, China possessed some leverage in Malaysian politics by virtue of its links with the MCE. As early as 1959 the government acknowledged that, although the Soviet Union was acclaimed as the leader of 'the international Communist movement', it was China which had the 'dominating influence' over the activities of the MCP. In this regard, China had the ability to step up insurgent activity in Malaysia when hostility was perceived or to reduce militancy in response to friendliness.

Secondly, local Chinese unhappiness with government policies, evident by the results of the 1959 general election, forced the government to rethink its China policy. Popular support for the Alliance government slipped from 81.7 per cent in 1955 to 51.8 per cent in 1959. Its major losses were in the Chinese-dominated urban constituencies, contested by the pro-Kuomintang Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a partner in the Alliance. In contrast, the major gains were made by the opposition Socialist Front and the People's Progressive Party, which had been especially critical of the
government's policy on China. The government realized that being impervious to public sentiment was detrimental to its survival and was thus forced to review its China policy. Facilitating the reappraisal was the lifting of the state of emergency in 1960. It implied the diminution of the local communist threat to the government, and hence removed the moral justification for avoiding the communist powers.

To circumvent adverse public reaction, and especially among the Malay community, the government stressed that recognition would be dependent upon China's securing membership of the United Nations. Such a policy was justified on the grounds that membership of the United Nations would not only oblige China to behave responsibly in the international community but was also vital to the international negotiations on disarmament. Thus in 1960 Malaysia veered away slightly from America's line on China by advocating Beijing's representation together with that of the Taipei regime in the UN. The Malaysian government's affinity for the anti-communist regime in Taipei as well as its unwillingness to exacerbate the pro-Taiwan and pro-China cleavages within the Chinese community at home constrained it from adopting a 'one China' policy in the United Nations. In an attempt to reconcile Malaysia's 'two Chinas' policy and America's 'one China' (Taiwan) policy, Kuala Lumpur tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Washington to adopt a similar policy.

To summarize, the political leadership's ideological predisposition fitted neatly into the Cold War cleavages in the international system to induce a distinctly anti-communist, pro-Western orientation in Malaysia's foreign policy. However, regional and domestic considerations tempered its hostility towards the Asian communist powers, producing some variation in the policies pursued by Malaysia on the one hand and the leader of the Western bloc on the other.

Containment and Change, 1963-67

By the mid-1960s, some significant changes had taken place in Malaysia's foreign policy. While the bonds with the Western camp remained firm in the Cold War climate, Malaysia also began to flirt
with non-alignment. Though rapprochement with the communist powers may have had its own logic, it nevertheless lent some credence to Malaysia's newly-found interest in non-alignment. Interestingly enough, the roles of the communist powers became reversed during this period. Whereas a conciliatory strain had been noticeable in Malaysia's policy towards the Asian communists earlier, its attitude hardened after 1963. Conversely, vilification of the Soviet Union decreased, and Malaysia eventually normalized relations with the superpower.

To explain the transformation in Malaysia's foreign policy, we will begin with the impact of structural developments in the global balance of power. Loose bipolarity, characterized by the East-West dichotomy, began to devolve into a looser bipolar structure. To some extent, the cohesion among the opposing blocs was loosened as a result of the declining tensions between the superpowers. From 1959 onwards, the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in a constructive endeavour to achieve some form of modus vivendi. In the main, the dangers of nuclear confrontation, strikingly illustrated by the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, provided the catalyst for mutual accommodation. However, realpolitik considerations, in the wake of the Sino-Soviet conflict, also contributed to the convergence of Soviet-American interests, especially in relation to the containment of Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Thus the gradual Soviet-American rapprochement contrasted sharply with an increase in superpower hostility towards Chinese communism, underwritten in the case of the United States by its military involvement in Vietnam. For a nation that had identified itself closely with the Western bloc in international politics, Malaysia could not but be influenced by the reorientation in American foreign policy.

If anything, developments in Asia reinforced Malaysia's adjustment to the shifting American line on world affairs. The Sino-Indian border war of December 1962, the result of a complex set of factors involving territorial sovereignty, ideology and Afro-Asian leadership,61 was nevertheless interpreted in a selective manner by Malaysian policy-makers so as to confirm their fears of the 'glaring red signal of danger to non-communist Asia'.62 In condemning China's role in the war, it is significant that the Tunku made references to Chinese maps which showed Malaysia as part of
Chinese territory. The humiliation suffered by India discredited somewhat the utility of non-alignment as a posture in world affairs, and vindicated the Tunku's fundamental belief that nations must take sides in the East-West conflict. But at the same time, Malaysia could no longer ignore the Sino-Soviet conflict. Even the Tunku, in spite of his closed view of international politics, could not but be sensitive to the fact that the Soviet Union had remained neutral in the Sino-Indian war. Acknowledgement of the Sino-Soviet dispute in turn had important implications for 'international communism', which had been central to the shaping of Malaysia's outlook towards the outside world.

The advent of Konfrontasi, as the Malaysian-Indonesian dispute of 1963-66 was known, further contributed to the divergence in Malaysia's perceptions of the communist powers. The formation of Malaysia in 1963 was followed by Indonesia's 'confrontation', which sought the disintegration of the new federation. Compounding Malaysia's security dilemma was the fact that the communist powers had thrown their support behind Jakarta. However, the Malaysian policy-making elite was conscious of the dynamics of the Sino-Soviet competition in South-east Asia. Soviet support for Indonesia was largely rhetorical in nature. In fact, as the Indonesian-Malaysian dispute began to subside, Moscow publicly expressed regret over the whole affair. China, by contrast, had supported the formation of the 'Jakarta-Hanoi-Beijing-Pyongyang axis', which could only have the impact of augmenting the Malaysian leadership's suspicions of the evolution of 'Asian communism' following the disintegration of the international communist movement, a perception reinforced by the growing insurgency in South Vietnam. As the Tunku claimed, 'the Indonesian policy towards Malaysia appeared to be part of a well-co-ordinated plan which originated in Peking' for the purpose of spreading 'subversion, infiltration and guerrilla warfare in South-east Asia'. The growing hostility towards China manifested itself in Malaysia's decision in 1963 to revert to voting against the admission of China into the United Nations.

The reverberations of Konfrontasi were, however, felt in the wider arena of Malaysia's foreign policy. Given its over-reliance on the Western powers for protection, Malaysia was considered, especially in Afro-Asian eyes, a neo-colony of the West. Such a reputation
largely explains Malaysia's almost total isolation in international forums like the United Nations during *Konfrontasi*, especially at a time when external support was critical in its conflict against Indonesia. But lessons were learned quickly. Between 1964 and 1965, Malaysia dispatched goodwill missions to woo African states. At the same time, it intensified its efforts to secure an invitation to the ill-fated Second Afro-Asian Conference, which was scheduled to be held in Algiers. By logical extension, ties with the communist world were also essential to demonstrate to the international community Malaysia's independent status.

In this connection, the need for ties with the communist powers was strengthened by pressures from within the domestic polity. It was noted earlier that the opposition parties in general had agitated for the loosening of Malaysia's bonds with the West and the establishment of friendly relations with all countries. A similar policy was advocated by the Malaysian Afro-Asian People's Organization, whose stature had increased in domestic politics as a result of the government's decision to cultivate the Afro-Asian countries during *Konfrontasi*. Equally important were the views of Singaporean leaders, who also used foreign policy issues to challenge the authority of the central government. For instance, the island's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was to remind the Malaysian government that 'there are different kinds of Communists and some could be useful to us'. His deputy, Dr Toh Chin Chye, noting the parallel in American-Malaysian policies, saw it fit to point out that The US is 100 per cent antagonistic towards the communist countries, and yet she has diplomatic relations with them.

Significantly, certain members of the ruling regime also began to agitate for a reorientation in Malaysia's foreign policy. The Alliance's External Affairs Parliamentary Group urged the government to establish the 'widest diplomatic representation possible with countries irrespective of their ideologies'. Likewise, influential politicians outside the cabinet but members of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and the MCA - component parties of the Alliance - appealed to the government to adopt a more neutral posture in world affairs. Among them were those who were contemptuous of the Tunku's administration and used foreign policy issues to challenge his
authority. Gradually, the Tunku was himself forced to modify his image of the international system. He conceded that 'the world now has three blocs - the Western, Communist, and Afro-Asian blocs'. He also acknowledged that Malaysia should not be regarded as 'a creation or protege of Britain'.

In the light of the events that had taken place in Malaysia's external environment and mindful of the mood within the ruling party, the government was forced to undertake a review of the country's foreign policy in 1965. The results of the review were summarized by the Tunku:

> We may have to change a little to keep pace with the trend of events in the world. We do not - and cannot - live alone.

It is apparent that the Tunku was referring to a shift towards a non-aligned posture in world affairs, including normalized relations with communist countries. However, an element of continuity in Malaysia's foreign policy remained, namely, the diverse attitudes towards the Soviet Union on the one hand and China and Vietnam on the other.

It is interesting to note that following the foreign policy review, Malaysia began to distinguish between 'peaceful' and 'militant' forms of communism. The following statements illustrate the contrast:

> We are not against communism as an ideology although we ourselves believe in democracy, but we are against its militant form...Malaysia is against the communism as practised by Communist China.

> The Russians...Their policy, as we understand it today, is a policy of peaceful coexistence with all other countries, in order to maintain peace in the world.

It is especially significant that the Malaysian elite's images of the communist powers bore a striking resemblance to the American line in world politics, underwritten by the gradual thaw in Soviet-American relations and outright American hostility towards China and Vietnam. While this was a function of Malaysia's alignment with
the leader of the Tree World' in the Cold War context, the post-
Konfrontasi period nevertheless witnessed the ascendancy of
American influence in Malaysian politics. Although Konfrontasi had
increased Malaysia's reliance on Britain for its external security, other
developments during this period, especially Malaysia's expulsion of
Singapore from the federation in 1965 and Britain's decision to
curtail defence aid to Malaysia, produced strains in the Anglo-
Malaysian relationship. What is more, by 1966, it was becoming
more than apparent that Britain would trim its military presence in
Malaysia. In this connection, the newly-found interest in non-
alignment was a strategy by which Malaysia had hoped to enhance its
external security. But dependence on great and powerful friends in
the West for Malaysia's external security remained a trusted foreign
policy strategy for the political elites and inclined Malaysia towards
a very cordial relationship with the United States. As the Malaysian
king told President Lyndon Johnson in 1966:

The part which America is playing has won the highest esteem
of small nations like Malaysia which look to your support for
their security - in fact for their very survival.

Incidentally, the United States itself was also interested in forging
closer ties with the anti-communist countries in South-east Asia as a
result of its involvement in Vietnam. Washington's cultivation of
Malaysia was manifested in massive purchases of rubber, the
provision of technical and military aid, and the sudden increase in
American dignitaries visiting Malaysia, including a presidential visit
in 1966.

Hand in glove with the United States, Malaysia sought the
containment of 'militant' Asian communism in South-east Asia. In
this regard, the revolutionary nature of Chinese foreign policy,
especially the spillover of the Cultural Revolution into foreign
relations - exemplified by the revolutionary activity of the Chinese
embassies in Cambodia and Burma - reinforced Malaysia's image of
China as the major threat to South-east Asia. The pressures generated
by Malaysia's domestic environment neatly dove-tailed into the Cold
War dynamics. Following the Sino-Soviet 'split', the MCP accepted
Beijing's patronage, leading the Malaysian government to consider
the local communists as 'agents' of Chinese communism. That an 'alternative government', the 'Malayan National Liberation League', modelled upon the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front, was allowed to function in Beijing further fuelled the ire of the Malaysian leadership. Mention must also be made of ethnicity as a factor determining the state of the Sino-Malaysian relationship. Singapore's participation in Malaysian politics between 1963 and 1965 had greatly polarized relations between the local Chinese and Malay communities, which deteriorated further over the National Language Bill controversy of 1967. The government could not afford to be friendly towards China when the mood of the Malays - the biggest segment of the population - was distinctly anti-Chinese in nature.

Unfortunately, the Malaysian leadership's belief in 'militant' Asian communism led by China clouded an appreciation of the historical Sino-Vietnamese conflict. Instead, Malaysian policy-makers argued that 'China's policies are central to the problems of world peace', and that 'the Vietnamese conflict is the testing ground for the so-called "People's War"'. Likewise, the Tunku believed that 'if the Chinese called off the fighting tomorrow, the fighting would end'.

Malaysia's containment of China took the form of enthusiastic support for the United States in the Second Indochinese War, including the offer of rest and recreational facilities for American military personnel and the training of South Vietnamese officers. Consistent with its containment strategy and influenced no doubt by the United States, Malaysia sought newer anti-communist allies in the Asia-Pacific region. In 1966, it joined the Asian and Pacific Council, generally regarded as an anti-China alliance. In the same year, it established consular ties with the Taibei regime.

Suffice it to say that the Malaysian government's enthusiasm for the United States' containment strategy was not entirely unqualified. In fact, the leadership was aware that the Vietnam War was highly unpopular in the United States, and was finding it increasingly difficult to justify Malaysia's continuing support for the American war effort to its own domestic constituency. It was also mindful that the United States might eventually be forced to disengage militarily from Indochina, given the opposition to the war in the United States and the stalemate on the battlefield. In this connection, outright hostility towards Hanoi could only be counterproductive to
Malaysia's interests in the long term. In any case, Malaysia's position over the Vietnam War was at variance with world opinion at large. In the West, France and the Scandinavian countries had consistently condemned the American intervention in Indochina. Others, like Britain, had qualified their support for the United States and called for a negotiated settlement of the war. Also significant was the position adopted by Singapore after its independence. Worried about the Cold War shifting to the Malaysia-Singapore region as a result of the closer alignment in Malaysian-American policies, Singapore's Prime Minister threatened to offer the Soviets basing facilities on the island.\(^94\)

Within Malaysia itself, opposition to the American involvement in Vietnam was mounting. In the main, the Chinese-based opposition parties registered their sentiments through constitutional channels such as parliament and the media, and by their vote. For example, Dr Tan Chee Khoon, an opposition leader who was respected by the ruling elite, questioned the government's morality, given the latter's support of the American war effort, which included the use of poison gas, defoliation of crops, widespread destruction and the mounting loss of lives through sustained bombing.\(^95\) Left-wing, anti-war elements, some influenced by the MCP, vented their frustration in street rallies which sometimes degenerated into riots.\(^96\) Equally important, sections within the ruling party were also unhappy with Malaysia's close identification with the United States over the war. Representing such a view was Jaafar Albar, a former leader of UMNO's youth wing and popular with the Malay grassroots. According to him, supporting the United States against communism was one thing, but bringing the Cold War into South-east Asia - Malaysia's backyard - was different altogether.\(^97\)

It is clear that the Malaysian leadership was caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, it hoped for a decisive victory over the Asian communists. On the other, it could no longer ignore the reality of the international and domestic situation. For these reasons, Malaysia was forced to hedge its support for the United States with token gestures which advocated a peaceful settlement to the Vietnamese conflict.\(^98\) The possibility that the United States would withdraw militarily from Vietnam made the permanent presence of China in South-east Asia more salient in the minds of Malaysian decision-makers. Thus from
around 1966 onwards a conciliatory tone was once again beginning to manifest itself in Malaysia's policy toward China. The leadership now peddled the line that Malaysia would reconsider its position on China provided that the latter changed its attitude towards Malaysia."

Meanwhile, the ambivalence in the Malaysian government's attitude towards the Soviet Union gradually gave way to a normalized relationship. Like the United States, Malaysia had also looked upon Moscow as a potential counterweight to Beijing's influence in South-east Asia. Such a consideration began to bear even more heavily in the wake of the impending British and American military disengagement. Opinion within the ruling party, particularly among the more educated and those interested in foreign affairs, advocated an informal strategic alliance with the Soviet Union. An influential representative of such a view was Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who later became the country's fourth Prime Minister. He urged the government to ignore 'the old refrain [that] we should have nothing to do with the communists'. In the context of Malaysia's external security, his prescription was that 'Russia would be our best bet against the mad scientists of Sinkiang'. Strategic considerations aside, domestic considerations also favoured a rapprochement with the Soviet Union. The MCP's ideological genuflection towards Beijing effectively discharged Moscow's commitments to the local insurgents. In any case, Moscow had given specific assurances not to interfere in Malaysia's domestic politics. In 1967, Malaysia established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. In the larger setting of Malaysia's foreign policy, formal contact with the communist world helped to enhance Malaysia's pretensions of being non-aligned in world affairs. For the Soviet Union, ties with Malaysia helped to refurbish its influence in insular South-east Asia following the failure of its diplomacy in Indonesia.

In retrospect, the period 1963-67 stands out as a watershed in Malaysia's foreign policy. Regional considerations pushed the country towards non-alignment, in the course of which it sought rapprochement with the communist world. At the same time, the anti-communist bias of the leadership continued to regard the communist nations with suspicion and hostility. However, the choice regarding friendship with or animosity towards the communist powers was
determined by Malaysia's susceptibility to the structural changes in the global balance of power.

**Conclusion**

The ideological disposition of the policy-making elite, the amicable relationship with the former colonial power, and the dependence on the West for its security and prosperity had combined to produce a distinctly pro-Western, anti-communist orientation in Malaysia's foreign policy. In the context of such an orientation, Malaysia conceived its role in international politics as a 'faithful ally of the West' and an 'anti-communist agent'. These roles reinforced each other in the containment of communism world-wide.

However, significant changes in global and regional balances of power, especially the Sino-Soviet conflict and *Konfrontasi*, necessitated a reorientation in Malaysia's foreign policy which manifested itself in a flirtation with non-alignment and limited *rapprochement* with the communist nations. It is nevertheless significant that these changes paralleled the transformation of the international system from a loose bipolar to a very loose bipolar system, a phenomenon which increased Malaysia's manoeuvrability in world politics.

In evaluating Malaysia's diplomacy during the Cold War, this study has also yielded some interesting observations regarding the country's foreign policy in general. In the first place, perceptions of power determined Malaysia's discriminating attitudes towards the communist countries on the one hand and Western nations on the other. With regard to the communist powers, it is clear that Malaysia was more deferential towards China and Vietnam than the Soviet Union, notwithstanding the latter's superpower status. This was largely due to considerations of geography relative to Malaysia's limited power in world politics. Hostility towards Moscow was related to the great distance which separated Malaysia from the Soviet Union. In contrast, nearness contributed to the conciliatory tone in its foreign policy towards the Asian communists. With regard to the Western powers, it is obvious that Malaysia's alignment with the West was manifested through its close relationship with Britain. However, Malaysia took the cues in its foreign policy from the United States. Again, power considerations determined Malaysia's actions, given that the United States, not Britain, had the capability
and credibility to contain communism world-wide.

Secondly, Malaysia, in aligning itself closely with the West in the Cold War, faced the dilemma of having to reconcile its own interests with those of the West. This was amply borne out in Malaysia's position on China's entry into the United Nations and its support for the American war effort in Vietnam. In both cases it was unwilling to adopt policies that were radically different from the United States' position. The fact remains that the bipolar structure of the international system allowed little room for manoeuvre in Malaysia's foreign policy. In this regard, a state lower down the hierarchy of power might seek to induce flexibility in its foreign policy by influencing the bloc leader to modify its policy, strikingly illustrated by Malaysia's attempt to convince the United States to support China's entry into the United Nations.

Thirdly, the moralistic strain in Malaysia's foreign policy had initially disallowed any form of relationship with the communist powers. It was the same spirit that saw Malaysia forge an alliance with the West so as to contain if not destroy the 'evil' of communism. Yet, political maturity resulted in realpolitik being viewed in moral terms. As the normalization of relations with the Soviet Union has shown, Malaysia considered the manipulation of one communist power against another to be morally legitimate.

Finally, the Cold War also provides a valuable insight into the origins of as well as the commitment to non-alignment in Malaysia's foreign policy. Non-alignment did not have ideological roots in Malaysia's world view compared with countries such as Burma, India and Egypt, but emerged as a strategy of expedience in the wake of its isolation in world affairs. This is clearly shown by the fact that while Malaysia appeared interested in non-alignment, it actively supported the destruction of North Vietnam, a non-aligned country. On a similar note, Malaysia's ties with the Soviet Union were not a function of a non-aligned policy inasmuch as its non-aligned credentials gained credibility with the limited rapprochement with the communist world. Nevertheless, the flirtation with non-alignment paid dividends for Malaysia in the long run. It made the eventual transition from a pro-Western anti-communist posture to a non-aligned one in the 1970s less problematic.

National University of Singapore
NOTES

2. The Federation of Malaya became independent in 1957. It was enlarged in 1963 to cover the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak as well as the island state of Singapore to form Malaysia. Singapore was evicted from the federation in 1965. For convenience, the term 'Malaysia' will be used throughout this paper.
7.-visible
32. See Peter Boyce, Malaysia and Singapore in International Diplomacy: Documents and Commentaries (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1968), p.4. See also Ott, op. cit., p.229.
33. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 20 June 1966, col. 2863.
40. Malaysia's society was deeply segmented according to ethnic divisions, with the Malays, Chinese and Indians comprising about 45 per cent, 37 per cent and 9 per cent of the population, respectively.
50. So far as the Malaysian government was concerned, it could not follow a similar policy towards Vietnam until the provisions of the Geneva Agreement were fully implemented.
54. See, for example, *Straits Times*, 1 Dec. 1959, p.2.
65. Evident from the Tunku's comments in the *Straits Times*, 25 July 1964, p.20.
70. *Straits Times*, 22 July 1965, p.5.
76. *Straits Times*, 20 March 1965, p.l.