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THE *KONFRONTASI*: THE UNDECLARED WAR THAT LED TO A BETTER PEACE

By

Adam Leong Kok Wey

The recent successful launch of the Trilateral Maritime Patrol (TMP) in June 2017 enabled Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines to conduct joint sea and air patrols in the Sulu Sea area. The trilateral patrols also involve information sharing and coordinated communications among the three members. Hot pursuits, once a bane among these three Southeast Asia countries often suspicious of each other's interference in sovereignty, are also allowed and controlled via three Maritime Command Centres (MCC) located in Tarakan and Tawau in Sabah, and Bongao in the Philippines.

These recent developments in sub-regional cooperation among these three Southeast Asian nations were a surprising reversal of decades-old strategic rivalries among them, which included a lesser-known 'war' between two of the members of the TMP. It could not be imagined during the tumultuous years between 1950s until the end of the 1960s that these three states will eventually be able to cooperate and work together to counter common security risks in the Sulu Sea area.

This Commentary will shed light on a little known war between two of ASEAN's founding members that led to a political outcome that laid the foundation of the peaceful settlement and reconciliation between these two states that had significant ramifications for the Southeast Asia region. B.H. Liddell Hart, a prominent strategic thinker of the 20th century once said, "The legitimate object of war is a more perfect peace." If there is a question about the purpose of war to obtain a better peace, the *Konfrontasi* provides an excellent example on the utility of war that provided the catalyst for a more stable and peaceful Southeast Asia region today.

The *Konfrontasi* was an “undeclared war” fought between Malaysia and Indonesia. The conflict started when Malaysia, consisting of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore, was formed on September 16, 1963. Indonesia under President Sukarno was vehemently against the formation of Malaysia, which Sukarno saw as a British grand strategy to contain Indonesia’s geopolitical ambitions in the region. Indonesia then was suspected to be sympathetic to the communists and they were worries among the Western powers that Indonesia may be used as a springboard to support the spread of communism in the region. Numerous Southeast Asia countries were facing internal communist insurgencies at that point and these suspicions were justified then. The Philippines was also against the formation of Malaysia as it claimed Sabah (known as North Borneo then). The Philippines broke off diplomatic relations with Malaysia but did not resort to the use of military forces. Sukarno however, launched a “*Ganyang Malaysia*” or “crush Malaysia” campaign, initially using political, economic, and propaganda means. When these actions failed, he decided to launch military attacks against Malaysia.

Indonesian military forces conducted cross border raids in Sarawak and Sabah from Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo) through the porous mountainous and jungle borders. This was effectively countered by Malaysian security forces, aided by a strong contingent of British Commonwealth military forces – mostly from the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. The slow and miserable results gained from the Indonesian cross border raids in Sabah and Sarawak frustrated Sukarno and prompted him in the middle of 1964 to open a second front in Peninsular Malaysia to divert the attention of the British Commonwealth and Malaysian security forces, and to boost the morale of Indonesian military forces embroiled in the fringes of Sabah and Sarawak.

Indonesian commandos launched amphibious raids on the coastal areas of Johor and Singapore, and later para-commandos were also parachuted into Peninsular Malaysia to conduct subversion and sabotage attacks. All of these Indonesian commando operations were foiled with the Indonesian commandos either killed or captured by Malaysian and British Commonwealth security forces. Meanwhile, the Indonesian military forces continued to attempt cross-border attacks in Sabah and Sarawak but were continuously disrupted by track-and-ambush operations conducted by Malaysian and British Commonwealth security forces. Some of these operations were kept secret and codenamed ‘Claret’ that involved dangerous cross border track-and-raid operations inside Indonesian Kalimantan area.

Meanwhile, Indonesia had also used international propaganda to degrade Malaysia. Jakarta initially gained the trust of the Afro-Asian states, at that point an important group of mostly ex-colonial newly independent states which form a large group of members in the United Nations and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Their opinion and support was important to provide international recognition and within the United Nations. Malaysia countered Indonesia’s claims by conducting a whirlwind of diplomatic visits between 1964 and 1965, led by the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Abdul Razak and Singapore’s Chief Minister Lee Kwan Yew. The visits explained the reasons behind Malaysia’s formation and eventually managed to turn the

tables on Indonesia. Malaysia successfully obtained recognition from almost all of these Afro-Asian states.

The *Konfrontasi* lasted until 1966, when Indonesia under its new leader Suharto (who had replaced Sukarno at the end of 1965), and suffering serious military setbacks and without much international support for its cause, decided to explore diplomatic options in ending the conflict. Both Indonesia and Malaysia held peace talks leading to the final conclusion of the undeclared war with the signing of a peace treaty in Bangkok. During the *Konfrontasi*, Malaysian and British Commonwealth security forces lost 114 men and the Indonesian military forces lost close to 600 men.

The end of the *Konfrontasi* led to the formation of ASEAN in 1967. It was initially formed as a regional organization to reconcile relations among three of its five pioneer members namely Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, and serve as an important confidence building measure. ASEAN has since expanded and included all of the Southeast Asian states. ASEAN has served remarkably well to quell regional competition and suspicions among its members, even though most of its members are still entangled in border and territorial disputes with each other. ASEAN has also done well in managing to integrate its regional economy and cooperate in natural disaster response and management. Contemporary security risks from Chinese assertive actions in the South China Sea and overlapping claims among some of the ASEAN members, however, will continue to test ASEAN's strategic coherence and response in the future.

As for Indonesia and Malaysia, both of these states have rebuilt their relationship and today are close partners in continuing ASEAN's collaborative spirit. Malaysia and the Philippines had restored their diplomatic relations and works closely today in the ASEAN. The Philippines however, have not dropped its claim on Sabah yet. The recent launching of the trilateral joint maritime and air patrols in the Sulu Sea by these threesome co-belligerents in the 1960s ensured that the *Konfrontasi* was not fought in vain 50 years ago and supporting Hart's posit that the purpose of war is to obtain a better peace.

Dr Adam Leong Kok Wey is an Assoc. Professor in strategic studies, and the Deputy Director of Research in the Centre for Defence and International Security Studies (CDiSS) at the National Defence University of Malaysia.

CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES (CDiSS)

National Defence University of Malaysia

Sungai Besi Camp, 57000 Kuala Lumpur

Phone: (+603) 9051 3400 ext. 4618

Fax: (+603) 9051 3031

E-mail: cdiss@upnm.edu.my