

Unequal Engagement: The United States and Decolonisation in Indonesia and Malaya, 1945-1957

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Introduction and Background

In the aftermath of the Second World War (WW2), the United States (US) emerged as the foremost economic and political superpower. For a short period, it was the only country which possessed an atomic bomb, accounting for just under 25% of world GDP in 1945. Its unprecedented position came under threat from the Soviet Union (USSR), which looked to spread its influence over much of the world, especially in Western Europe and decolonising countries. This was to undercut Washington's global position, the spread of democracy, and capitalist ideology, which caused the two former allies to clash in the geo-political and ideological arenas. The US took steps to safeguard its position, leading to the "firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies". This necessitated US involvement in foreign countries such as through the Marshall Plan in Western Europe and involvement in decolonisation in parts of the third world to prevent newly-independent states from turning communist.

Southeast Asia became a battleground between the US and communism, particularly in Indochina, Malaya, and Indonesia. This essay focuses on the latter two countries. The onset of the Cold War coincided with the decolonisation process in both countries, as the desire for independence had grown substantially during WW2. The Japanese Occupation had stoked existing anti-colonial sentiments in both countries, and various nationalist leaders began agitating for independence soon after the end of the war. Some existing communist groups such as Indonesia's Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI), formed before WW2 grew in size and popularity. US preoccupation with combating communism led it to focus on ensuring that these communist movements would not gain enough support to take control in either country.

In doing so, Washington interceded in both countries, albeit to vastly different extents. Despite initially supporting the Dutch in Indonesia, it later advocated for Indonesia's independence, eventually forcing the Dutch to grant Indonesian independence in 1949 with the threat of withholding Marshall Aid. Conversely, America's involvement in Malaya was centred on discreetly supporting the British. It was limited to assistance for the British such as through the Colombo Plan, as well as the Griffin and Jessup missions. Even at the height of the Malayan Emergency, US involvement was minimal—they contributed military equipment "as a stopgap measure" under the Mutual Defence Assistance Programme, but did little else. Instead, they "prefer[red] not to interfere in the affairs of the area."

For this essay, Indonesia and Malaya were chosen for their many similarities. With a majority Malay-Muslim population, they share a common cultural and historical heritage, dating back to the ancient Majapahit and Srivijaya Empires. Both were important producers of natural resources for their colonial metropole and had a significant communist presence. Yet, the process of decolonization, especially Washington's attitude towards it, was very different. Indonesia received independence in 1949, 8 years before Malaya did. Few studies have examined both decolonisation processes concomitantly. Most provide broad examinations of Southeast Asia's diplomatic history and decolonisation. There has been extensive scholarship on American involvement in Indonesian decolonisation, given their key role in the process, but there has been less scholarship on US involvement in Malaya. This essay explores various reasons why the US, a country intent on preventing the

spread of communism, remained by the sidelines in Ma-laya despite the raging Malayan Emergency, but decisively intervened in Indonesia.

Economic and Strategic Significance

While neither country was an indispensable source of resources to the US in the postwar period, Indonesia's oil production in a strategic location made it more significantly valuable than Malaya. Even before WW2, the US held strong interests in Indonesia's oil industry, centred around Palembang, as the Dutch government worked to attract US companies to its oil fields. Chevron (then the Standard Oil Company of California) began the exploration of oil in Indonesia in 1924 and drilled wells in Minas and Duri in the 1940s. Exxon began exploration in 1912. Both companies have assets in Indonesia even today, demonstrating the longevity of US economic interests in Indonesia. Washington wanted to safeguard these sizable assets after WWII, even against the Dutch. According to US communications in the months leading up to the first Dutch Police Action, where it became increasingly clear that Dutch wanted to resort to violence to suppress the nationalist movement, one of the key reasons for US opposition to Dutch aggression was the disruption to US oil fields in Palembang. This would have adversely impacted Indonesian and American economic interests, which were "vital for necessities of life to the community in this country". Ambassador Herman Baruch "made the suggestion that possibly the appearance of an American warship... the friendly display of our flag—in the vicinity might have a salutary effect", on the eve of the Dutch offensive. Baruch's assessment was supported by a 'Mr Vincent', who "thought it might be advisable to consider having one of our vessels... proceed to Palembang where US oil interests are centred." The fact that a show of force against the Dutch was even considered—potentially jeopardizing US-Dutch relations—shows how important these oil fields were to the US. Ultimately, "a politically and economically stable Indonesia would be valuable to the US in order than (sic) an important source of strategic raw materials may be made available to this country." This also highlights another dimension of Indonesia's significance because its oil resources were situated near the British naval base of Singapore, a critical asset to US naval strategy in 1949. Oil was a key commodity for 20th-century navies, and Indonesia was a strategically located source of oil that would help the US, as an aspiring Pacific power, project power over the Pacific.

With Malaya, the US relied on it for its rubber and tin supplies before and during WWII. Reimer claims that, until 1942, "British Malaya furnished the United States with 55 per cent of its crude rubber." Over the course of WW2, Malayan rubber production became less crucial to the US as the expansion of production in countries like Nigeria, the Gold Coast, and French West Africa and the rapid development of American synthetic rubber production during WW2 helped America wean off (though not completely independent) of natural rubber. Wendt claims that "Adequate supplies of synthetic rubber [were] assured by mid-1943", as Washington imported 1,029.0 thousand long tons of natural rubber in 1941, but only 59.9 thousand in 1943. Correspondingly, its capacity for synthetic rubber production increased from 15,000 to 748,500 thousand short tons in the same time period, and 622,500 thousand short tons at the end of the war. The American Chemical Society put total US post-war production of synthetic rubber at 920,000 tons per year, far outstripping the pre-war consumption rate of 600,000 tons. Similarly, Malayan tin, despite remaining Washington's primary source of tin, faced "increasing competition from other areas of production and from technological developments." Thus, the US-Malayan relationship declined in importance after WWII. Access to Malayan resources was deemed "desirable but not essential."

Unlike in Indonesia's oil industry, the US did not retain a significant stake in Malayan rubber production post-WWII. US Rubber sold all 31,000 acres of its Malayan rubber estates in the 1950s, though it

continued to purchase Malayan rubber through the Singapore Rubber Exchange throughout the Malayan Emergency. Furthermore, the smooth “Malayanisation” of the tin and rubber industries in the 1950s brought about minimal disruptions to overall rubber production in Malaya. Bauer predicted that decolonisation would not disrupt Malayan rubber production as “Experience in other British colonies suggests that even far-reaching constitutional and political changes do not bring about corresponding changes in policies.” Thus, even the minimal interests that the US retained in Malaya were not threatened by decolonisation.

Geostrategically, Indonesia was also more important than Malaya. According to Laksmana: Indonesia hosts four of the world’s seven major maritime choke points while sitting between the Pacific and Indian Oceans and between the Asian and Australian continents. As such, major powers have historically been drawn to and have taken considerable interest in the development of Indonesia as it could tip the regional balance of power.

An Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) meeting report from September 22-25, 1952 supports this assessment: “In enemy hands, these territories would provide bases for attacks to be developed against the mainland of Australia... geographical relation to the various sea routes in the area would make their potential base facilities valuable for the control of sea communications.” This was further reflected in a 1950 CIA report which stated that: “Indonesia [is an] important element in the... outer perimeter of US defenses in the Pacific and controls access from mainland Asia to the Australia-New Zealand area.” The US recognized Indonesia’s importance to the security of the region and its ability to project power over the Pacific. Wielding influence over Indonesia was in Washington’s strategic interest, which entailed supporting the side that could maintain stability in the region.

Malaya, however, did not have the same strategic value as Indonesia. A 1950 CIA report stated that the greater consequence of losing Malaya was the “increased infiltration of Communists from Malaya to Indonesia”. A separate report that year ranked Malaya as the lowest priority (fifth) for the provision of military aid, below Indonesia (fourth) and Indochina (first). Furthermore, Sodhy points out that “Implied or explicit references to IndoChina... occur as a constant theme in the United States relations with Malaya.” Despite being in close proximity to the Straits of Malacca, US interests in Malaya were placed below and constantly framed in terms of its consequences to Indonesia and Indochina. Thus, at both a strategic and economic level, Indonesia was consistently more important than Malaya to the US. However, this alone does not explain why Washington would intervene in one country but not the other. A more significant reason was the different nature of the communist movements in both countries.

The Communist Threat

Despite the existence of a significant communist threat in both countries, the US perceived the threat in Indonesia to be far greater than the threat in Malaya. This can be explained partly by its fundamentally different levels of interest; a communist takeover in Indonesia would arguably be more detrimental to Washington than a takeover in Malaya for reasons previously outlined. Yet, the likelihood of this occurring in Indonesia was more acute than it was in Malaya as Indonesian communism was more evenly spread across communities than in Malaya, where it was largely confined to the Chinese population.

The largest influence over Malayan communism came from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Born from its Nanyang branch, the Malayan Communist Party’s (MCP) ideals were inextricably tied to Chinese nationalism and received strong support from the CCP in its nascent years. Communism became popular almost exclusively among the Chinese community, and it was only in 1928 that the MCP (then the Nanyang Communist Party) recognized the need to start a “national movement” in Malaya by attracting the Indian and Malay communities. This was to no avail. Belogurova cites a report of the Third Representative Conference of Nanyang (1930) stating that, of the 1130 party members, only five were Malay and one was Indian. The lack of racial diversity was put down to the “condescending attitudes” of MCP members towards other races. MCP

leader Chin Peng corroborated the importance of the Malay and Indian communities, attributing the communist defeat to the failure to garner enough support from them. The historical polarization of race relations in Malaya, coupled with communism's associations with the Chinese community, increasingly alienated the Malay and Indian communities from the communist movement, maintaining its unique monoethnic character within the minority Chinese population in Malaya. Additionally, Ngoi suggests that the special treatment that the British accorded the Malays in colonial times made them "immune to the influence of radical revolutionary thought." Belogurova concurs, suggesting that the British "recruited Malays into lower administrative ranks, protected Malay land rights, and preserved Malay peasant customs." In contrast, the Chinese were "denied their political rights as 'aliens'." The variable treatment of each group polarized the appeal of communism and enforced a racial divide, exemplified by multiple instances of inter-ethnic violence during the Japanese Occupation. Consequently, the Chinese community was less content and gravitated toward communism. The US Vice-Consul in Singapore, Robert J. Jantzen, summed it up in a 1948 report: communism could not take hold among the Malay community due to "the ingrained Malay hostility toward and suspicion of the Chinese, who have achieved a superior position in the country's economy". The Malayan political scene further insulated the Malay community, as prominent Malay politicians such as Tunku Abdul Rahman and Dato Onn bin Jafar were staunch anti-communists. Additionally, as the "titular founts of the temporal and spiritual authority in their respective territories," the respect and prestige that Malayan constitutional monarchs commanded among the Malay community made the anti-monarchical ideals of communism even more unpalatable.

While Malayan communism was historically associated with a particular minority community, this was not the case in Indonesia. From the beginning, the communist movement took hold in its Muslim-majority population, across religious and ethnic lines. The Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) emerged from radical factions within the Sarekat Islam (SI), an Islamic organization. Dutch Communists such as Henk Sneevliet targeted the SI not for ideological reasons, but for practical ones; the SI was the largest mass movement in Indonesia at the time, and infiltrating and radicalizing its existing support base was part of The Communist International (Comintern) "bloc within" strategy. Though nominally an Islamic organization, its "hazy political orientation" made it vulnerable to exploitation by the communists. From this diverse but unfocused base, the Indonesian communist movement became more widespread and permeated a society united by their "growing anti-government feeling", providing an outlet for growing anti-colonial sentiments. Indonesia did not have the same racial fissures as Malaya which caused communism to become rooted in a segment of the population, slowing its spread. Communism did not risk dominating the Malayan political scene as much as it did in Indonesia.

In comparing both predominantly Muslim countries, it is apparent that Malaya's Muslim population were averse to communism while Indonesia's were not. While Islam hindered the spread of communism in Malaya, it did not do so in Indonesia. McVey highlights the popularity of Islamic communist groups who "explained the Koran along Islamic Communist lines" in Java and Sumatra. "Islamic Communism" gained traction in Indonesia, especially among the "modernist" younger generation, attracted by its voracious anti-colonial message. However, the Muslim community in Malaysia "regarded the atheistic materialism of Marx and Engels as a complete anathema and rejected it out of hand as an undisguised attack on their religion". Ngoi suggests that the few Malays who adopted communist ideology did so as a "strategic move", with communism being a means to independence rather than an ideological conviction. Indonesian communists were not alone in reconciling Islam and communism. Pakistani Islamic scholar Dr Khalif Abdul Hakim reconciled parts of communism and Islam at an intellectual level, expounding a vision of "Islamic Socialism". This, along with the prominence of Islamic Communism in Indonesia would suggest that Islam's compatibility with communism was up to theological interpretation, though Ngoi suggests that the British colonial government intentionally played up these differences to prevent the rise of communism in Malaya, "emphasiz[ing] an identity based on religion and fermented narratives about how the communist thought was incompatible with religion."

The US was aware of the divided nature of Malayan communism, stating that “The key (to holding off communism) is the Chinese population.” A 1952 Memorandum on communist aggression in Southeast Asia recognized the associations of communism with the Chinese community, stating that a key facet of US strategy in Southeast Asia in the 1950s was to “encourage the overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia to organize and activate anti-communist groups and activities within their own communities.” The Malay community’s insularity from communism served as an effective roadblock to communist domination, given that they were the largest ethnic group (49 percent in 1957, as compared to the Chinese with 38 percent and Indians with 11 percent) . Despite making up just under half of Malaya’s population, they were sizable enough to ensure that, along with prominently anti-communist Malay politicians, it was less likely that communism would have been able to take over Malaya. Thus, the Malay community’s rejection of communism at the ethnic, religious, political and even cultural levels provided layers of security against communist domination of Malaya. The “real and immediate” threat in Indonesia naturally necessitated a greater degree of US involvement in Indonesia than Malaya.

The Wider Context

The aforementioned reasons are limited as they do not account for the wider context surrounding each event, which pushed the US towards different courses of action. Public and international perception of the conflict in Indonesia and Malaya was very different. This augmented Washington’s decision to support the Indonesian Nationalists and intervene in Indonesia. Pro-Indonesian independence protests had erupted across the US by the First Police Action in 1947. By 1948, opposition from various groups across the US had become “aggressive and intense”. The New York Times wrote that US aid had enabled the Netherlands to “send supplies and equipment to Indonesia that otherwise might have been impossible”, implying that US aid to the Dutch was being funnelled into a colonial war, contradicting America’s anti-imperialist public image. The shift in public opinion would have, at least, made it unfashionable for Washington to continue its support for the Dutch. International pressure was also mounting—the United Nations Security Council had passed 6 separate resolutions on Indonesia in 1947 and the same number in 1948. The Dutch were placed under intense diplomatic pressure for refusing to abide by them. Considering its prominent international standing, Washington could ill-afford to be perceived to endorse the actions of a recalcitrant nation through its silence on the matter.

Conversely, the Malayan Emergency gained far less international attention and involvement. Fought between British and Commonwealth forces and Malayan guerillas, international involvement was largely limited to support from the Chinese Communist Party and to a lesser extent, Comintern. Unlike with Indonesia, the UN stayed silent on the matter as it was not raised by any country. It was, perhaps, shielded from public scrutiny by the instability of its time—the peak of the emergency coincided with the Korean War and the death of Stalin. More importantly, it was seen as an anti-communist conflict—an “anti-red emergency” against “terrorists” by the New York Times. This painted events in a more favourable light: a campaign against communists was more palatable to the Wilsonian ideals of the American people than a colonial war seeking to restore an archaic order. Without public and international support, there was no pressure on Washington to intervene. While it would be remiss to suggest that Washington’s decision was made based on public and international pressure, this certainly helped calibrate its response to Indonesia.

The Relationship with the Colonial Powers

Ultimately, the most decisive reason for the disparity of US involvement was Washington’s relationship with either colonial power, as safeguarding US interests in either country would have invariably impinged upon its

relationship with the colonial powers. This also limited the degree of intervention which was practical and realistic.

In examining the US-Dutch relationship, there is an additional dimension to consider, as Indonesia remaining under Dutch control would actually help US interests in Europe by boosting the Dutch economy, making it less vulnerable to Communism. Indonesia had become extremely important to the Dutch economy, with a total colonial surplus of 14,556 million guilders, exporting 1,586 million guilders worth of products, the largest being petroleum and rubber, in 1939 alone. This highlights how crucial Indonesia was to the Dutch economy leading up to WW2, especially in providing important natural resources. Thus, it would be reasonable to assume that Indonesia would have a similarly crucial role in the post-war Dutch economy as it did pre-1939. Dutch reluctance to grant Indonesia independence was partly motivated by this. McMahon concurs that "(Indonesia) would contribute to the economic health of the Netherlands, which in turn would contribute to the economic health of Western Europe". Accordingly, US interests in Europe justified their initial support for the Dutch colonists in Indonesia. However, Dutch mismanagement in Indonesia endangered US interests there. Dutch military action threatened to destabilize Indonesia and destroy infrastructure in a region with which friendly relations would "best serve American economic and strategic needs in Southeast Asia". US Secretary of State Dean Rusk went further to state that "Dutch action [in] Indonesia appears to us as direct encouragement to spread (sic) of Communism in Southern Asia and as a serious blow to the prospect of development self-govt (sic) in that area under moderate national elements." Rusk argued that Dutch mismanagement threatened to subvert the anti-communist movement in the region by inadvertently uniting the nationalist and communist movements against them in the event of a protracted conflict. The "moderate" nationalist movement appeared better suited to handle the situation. McMahon cites a CIA report prepared for President Truman on January 19 1949: "(as a result of the Dutch Police Action) US Security interests in Europe and the Far East are in danger of appearing as mutually exclusive". Removing the Dutch from Indonesia would benefit Washington's interests in Indonesia but weaken the Dutch economy, making the Netherlands more vulnerable to communism.

However, these concerns were perhaps overblown. The likelihood of a communist takeover in the Netherlands was slim, as Dutch post-war governments were "relatively stable". The Communist Party of the Netherlands (CPN) did not enjoy widespread support, only gaining 7% of the popular vote (8 seats) in the 1948 election. Thus, the risk of American interests in Europe and Indonesia becoming mutually exclusive was not as great as initially claimed—the Netherlands was less vulnerable to communism than previously thought. Cognizant of the result, Washington was perhaps more willing to risk US-Dutch relations to maintain stability in Indonesia because Indonesia appeared more vulnerable at the time. Furthermore, the Indonesian Nationalists explicitly presented a way for the US to safeguard its interests in Indonesia, and US support for them was made explicit in a telegram on December 31, 1948: they were the "only govt (sic) in Far East to have met and crushed an all-out Communist offensive" referring to the Madiun Affair, in which PKI cadres seized control of Madiun. Nationalist forces led by Sukarno and Hatta violently crushed them. Gouda observes that the uprising was a test for the nationalists to prove their anti-communist credentials and gain the trust of the US, one which they "passed with flying colours".

Moreover, Dutch support for the Marshall Plan in Europe, while important, was not absolutely crucial, unlike support from the British, as the Netherlands was a relatively smaller player in European geopolitics at the time. Conversely, the "special" Anglo-American relationship was a key cog in the re-discovery of Western Europe, opposing communism, and in establishing the new, post-war world order. Brown suggests that this relationship was particularly close as, beyond the West's anti-communist aspirations, the "specific goal shared by the Anglo-American alliance was to project freedom and democracy through constitutional forms." The close relationship spurred the US to acknowledge British primacy in Malaya; Sodhy cites a 1951 Conference Report in saying that "the security of Malaya is the sole responsibility of the British and they have control of the internal security situation". This respect for and deference to the British in Malaya was exemplified through the US "reluctance to undertake any aid program that might have undercut British influence in Malaya and

Singapore” in vetoing the plan to provide monetary aid to Malaya as recommended by the 1950 Griffin Mission.

Washington’s decision to acknowledge British primacy proved crucial in influencing its actions. Despite consistently agreeing on British primacy in Malaya, internal disagreements about British capabilities had surfaced as internal correspondence took on an increasingly critical tenor by the mid-1950s. A 1955 NSC Progress Report on Malaya pointed out that “The British have thus far failed to develop a program adequate to counter Communist subversion.” There was a lack of confidence in British management of the spread of communism among the Chinese population. Yet, the same report pessimistically concludes that “U.S. ability to influence events in these areas is... severely limited by the primacy of British influence and responsibility.”—Washington had hamstrung itself regarding its options in Malaya. The “pessimistic view” held by some State Department officials towards the British ability to ward off the communists persisted until the Anglo-American ‘Eden talks’ on January 31 1956 reassured most officials of Britain’s ability to handle the situation, especially as a member of the newly-formed Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). These talks helped realign Anglo-American strategy, and subsequent disagreements appeared confined to the working rather than strategic level. A memorandum of May 23, 1956 contained a “chronological summary of the British resistance ... to establish arrangements for close working-level consultation”, describing the British as “anything but helpful”.

At no point did Washington impose its will on the British in Malaya as it did in Indonesia—its most intrusive action was to “continue tactfully [its] efforts to convince the British of the wisdom of encouraging local government leaders to take courses of action which appear to the U.S. to be necessary.” Despite their disagreements, Washington remained deferential to the British, and was generally satisfied with the British approach to decolonization: encouraging nationalism as a counterweight to communism, thereby satisfying Washington’s agendas of containment and self-determination. The strength of the Anglo-American relationship and strategic alignment withstood the loss of confidence where the Anglo-Dutch relationship did not.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the strengths of the Anglo-American relationship outweighed the benefits of intervention in Malaya to the extent that the US would not risk overstepping and jeopardizing their relationship with the British as they did with the Dutch. Strategically and economically, US interests were stronger in Indonesia. It was also more vulnerable to communism, without the Malay-Muslim bulwark that was present in Malaya. The Dutch, struggling to deal with the Communists, threatened US geopolitical interests; they were not protected from US coercion by strong bilateral relations. British struggles with communism in Malaya posed a comparatively minor threat to the US, and they enjoyed strong bilateral relations due to mutual respect and the importance of preserving the Anglo-American relationship. Washington willingly took on a secondary role to the British in Malaya, but was more direct and forceful with the Dutch. Though the seeds of intervention were already planted, international pressure on the Dutch catalysed Washington’s response to the point that it had to intervene in Indonesia. As Sukarno put it, Washington “hit postwar Holland where she was most vulnerable... The Hague heard the sound of the American wallet snap shut.”

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