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Background - NZ and the Confrontation in Borneo Greater Malaysia

MCH, 2012n

Confrontation was a conflict which developed in 1963 between Indonesia and Malaysia backed by Commonwealth allies. Its origins lay in Great Britain's plans to divest itself of formal empire in South-east Asia. This would be achieved by federating the then Crown colonies in Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak), the protected state of Brunei, and the self-governing colony of Singapore with Malaya, which had been independent since 1957, and where the 12-year-long Emergency had formally ended in 1960. Formal agreement providing for a federation of greater Malaysia was reached between London and Kuala Lumpur in November 1961. Both parties agreed to establish the new state by 31 August 1963. Despite relinquishing sovereignty, the British were guaranteed the continued use of their bases at Singapore by the Malayan Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Indonesian opposition

The plans for a greater Malaysia were strongly opposed by neighbouring Indonesia and its charismatic president, Achmed Sukarno. He complained, with particular emphasis on the continued British military presence at Singapore, that London's grant of independence was not sincere. Sukarno reasoned that Malaysia, by virtue of its intended close relationship with Britain, would become a British satellite, ultimately serving to perpetuate, rather than end, European domination of the region. In addition, opposition to Malaysia conveniently buttressed the President politically, since engaging nationalist fervour against Britain distracted Indonesian public opinion from the appalling state of the nation's economy. It came as no surprise, therefore, when the Indonesian foreign minister, Dr Subandrio, declared on 20 January 1963 that Indonesia would henceforth pursue a policy of *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) against Malaysia.

Guerilla warfare

Sukarno was limited in his options for opposing Malaysia. Although equipped with modern weapons from Moscow, the Indonesian armed forces were not capable of prevailing in an open engagement with the British. Instead, Sukarno decided to encourage and support subversive movements already existing in Borneo. If allowed to develop into a major insurgency, the British might eventually be worn down into abandoning the objective of greater Malaysia altogether. By the end of 1963, this strategy increasingly involved Indonesian army regulars, posing as guerrillas, crossing the border from Kalimantan to attack the security forces in Borneo and then quickly retreating to the safety of Indonesian territory.

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