

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Mr Yang Razali Kassim.

Konfrontasi: **Why It Still Matters to Singapore**

By Daniel Wei Boon Chua

Synopsis

Despite happening almost fifty years ago, Konfrontasi (Confrontation) occupies a unique place in Singapore's national memory. Why does it still matter to Singapore today?

Commentary

KONFRONTASI (1963-66) was a low-intensity campaign launched by Indonesia's President Sukarno to oppose the formation of the Federation of Malaysia, which Singapore was a part of from 1963 to 1965. Although much of the conflict was fought near the Malaysian-Indonesian border in Borneo, Singapore's security and economy suffered severely during the campaign. The most significant incident of Konfrontasi was the bombing of MacDonald House on Orchard Road by two Indonesian marines on 10 March 1965, resulting in three civilians dead and 33 others injured. The impact of that event was lingering diplomatic tensions between Singapore and Indonesia until 1973.

On 10 March 2015, a memorial to commemorate the event and Konfrontasi was inaugurated opposite MacDonald House. Yet not many Singaporeans are familiar with the details of the bombing and the larger context of Konfrontasi. How much did Konfrontasi affect Singapore and why does the conflict still resonate with Singapore today?

Understanding Konfrontasi in Singapore

In a speech in Singapore on 27 May 1961, the Prime Minister of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, announced the idea of a federation of states, which would include Malaya, Singapore and the British territories in North Borneo, Sarawak, Sabah as well as Brunei. President Sukarno, who harboured intentions of unifying the archipelagic region in a Greater Indonesia, accused the West of seeking to preserve their grip on Southeast Asia through neo-colonial states and opposed the formation of the Federation of Malaysia vigorously.

After the diplomatic route of proposing an alternative grouping, Maphilindo involving Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines, fell through and the formation of Malaysia was realised in 1963, Indonesia's campaign to 'crush' Malaysia escalated from political, economic and psychological confrontation to armed aggression against the Malaysian Federation.

When Malaysia was formally established on 16 September 1963, Jakarta expelled the Malaysian ambassador, and subsequently severed trade links with Malaysia and Singapore on 21 September. In

fact, armed conflict had begun in Tebedu, Sarawak, as early as April 1963 and lasted until September 1965. Most of the clashes occurred near the Malaysian-Indonesian border in Borneo, which the Indonesians called Kalimantan, and subsequently spilled into Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore. Between 1964 and 1966, two Singapore Infantry Regiment (SIR) battalions were involved in fighting the Indonesians in Johore and Sabah.

Indonesia's objective in Singapore was to disrupt Singapore's financial capital and trade. During Konfrontasi, Singapore's economy suffered because of the loss of almost 24% of Indonesian trade in 1964, as well as the bombings that turned away potential foreign investors. Indonesian soldiers in plainclothes were believed to have instigated a violent racial riot on 4 September 1964.

On 14 November 1964, an attempt by ten Indonesian marines to sabotage an oil installation was foiled. One landing on the east of Singapore on 1 December and another on 28 December were also stopped when their movements were observed and reported by civilians. Apart from targeting key installations on the island, Indonesian regulars also conducted hit-and-run bombing attacks, including the bombing of MacDonald House.

The last major operation was launched on 26 June 1965 when four boats carrying 26 regulars arrived to attack a police station and a power station. The attempt ended in failure with the sinking of all four boats by security forces. After Singapore separated from the Federation of Malaysia on 9 August 1965, Indonesian incursions and bombings in Singapore ceased. The fall of Sukarno after a coup on 30 September 1965 shifted political power to General Suharto who declared the end of Konfrontasi in 1966.

MacDonald House bombing and its aftermath

Indonesia's only successful attack on Singapore was the bombing on 10 March 1965 at MacDonald House, in which were located a British bank and the Australian Commission. The two perpetrators from the KKO, a unit of the Indonesian Marines, were apprehended while trying to escape by boat, put on trial and given the death sentence in 1968. Although Singapore's relations with Indonesia improved when power shifted from Sukarno to Suharto, the execution of the two marines responsible for the bombing of MacDonald House during Konfrontasi heightened tensions between the two countries.

Despite pleas for clemency by Foreign Minister Adam Malik and President Suharto, Singapore stood firm by the verdict and executed the marines on 17 October 1968. Their bodies were handed over to the Indonesian embassy and transported back to Jakarta where they were hailed as national heroes. The bodies of the two marines were received by a large crowd at the airport and buried at the Kalibata Heroes' Cemetery. In Jakarta, a young mob sacked the Singapore embassy and tore down the Singapore flag. Members of the Singapore mission in Jakarta vacated the embassy before the violence broke out and were unharmed.

Indonesia was able to move on from the incident after Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's first official visit to Indonesia in May 1973, when he scattered flowers at the graves of the two marines. During the visit, the foreign ministers, S. Rajaratnam and Adam Malik, signed a border agreement that demarcated the maritime boundary between Singapore and Indonesia. In August 1974, Prime Minister Lee hosted President Suharto on his first official visit to Singapore, completing the rapprochement between the two countries.

Why Konfrontasi needs to be remember

The hanging of the two Indonesian marines in 1968 was a setback to bilateral ties but was necessary to assert Singapore's independence. In early 2014, the naming of an Indonesian Navy ship, KRI Osman Harun, after the two marines, Osman Mohamed Ali and Harun Said, reopened old wounds and stirred up emotions among Singaporeans and Indonesians alike. Because Singapore conducts joint military exercises with the Indonesian Navy, the naming of KRI Osman Harun was not just insensitive, but also damaging to bilateral relations. Singapore has also expressed its disappointment over the ship naming faux pas.

The memorial to Konfrontasi inaugurated on 10 March 2015 is significant because it serves as a

reminder of an important event in Singapore's history. Clearly, memories related to Konfrontasi can still affect relations between two close neighbours. It is, therefore, vital that Singaporeans develop an awareness and understanding of the political events of one of its closest neighbours and appreciate how changes in Indonesia could adversely affect Singapore's diplomacy and economy.

Daniel Wei Boon Chua is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg