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**BRITAIN'S STONEWALL STRATEGY TOWARDS THE  
SUBVERSIVE ATTACKS ON SABAH IN 1968**

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*Abstract*

A series of unprecedented subversive attacks on Sabah by Filipino invaders after the Corregidor incidents in March 1968 had raised various responses from foreign countries. As a newly-established government, the security of Malaysia's boundaries was highly vulnerable and the nation therefore had to rely on assistance in terms of defence from the great powers. Bounded by the Anglo-Malaysian Defense Agreement (AMDA), the British government had to revise their role to provide defense assistance to Malaysia since they also had to maintain cordial relations with the Philippines. Thus, this study aims to examine the slick diplomacy and stonewall strategy used by the British government to make sure that they were not accused for not fulfilling their side of promise in AMDA whilst at the same time, preserving their favourable relations with the Philippines. The findings revealed that among others, the British government had not taken sides while they tried to minimise the defense assistance to Malaysia and avoided from giving any statement that may harm their diplomatic relations with the Philippines. This research was conducted based on historical documents such as reports, agreements, correspondence, newspapers and government gazettes. These primary and secondary sources were analysed using a diplomatic historical approach.

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## 1. Introduction

The Corregidor incident followed by Senate Bill 954 was marked as the most severe moment in the history of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and the Philippines. These tragedies were due to the Philippines' claim to Sabah which had especially peaked during the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos who deliberately planned a secret military training in Corregidor Island to attack Sabah. The Corregidor incident which is also known as the Jabidah Massacre had a very significant impact and influence on the Philippines and Malaysia relations including the issue of Filipino immigrants in Sabah. It had also become a catalyst and turning point to the formation of separation movement groups including the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM) and later, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

The military training or particularly known as "Merdeka Operation" was a very meticulous military exercise carried out by the Philippine government to attack Sabah. The insidious mission was just another form of radical attempt to claim Sabah after the Philippines' failure to claim it through official and diplomatic channels (FCO 24/260, 1968). The secret mission had allegedly begun in July 1967 after a decision was made to build a military training camp at Simunul Island. A few months afterwards, in September 1967, Major Martelino, the head of the Civil Affairs Office from the Department of National Defense of the Philippines arrived in Jolo and started the recruitment of trainees, especially amongst the Muslim communities from the nearby islands (FCO 24/260, 1968). At the end of December, after rumours about the camp had begun to spread and reached the Malaysian government's knowledge, the camp was transferred to Corregidor Island near Manila. Here was where military exercises were carried out, with most of the trainings involving various survival techniques were performed in the jungle. There were about 150 trainees involved in the operation, and about 80 of them started to leave Corregidor Island right after completing the training (FCO 24/260, 1968; Manila Broadens Mutiny Inquiries, 1968).

The secret training was finally revealed by the local media in the Philippines on 21 March 1968 after a mutiny by the trainees against the Philippines' armed forces due to their unpaid salary of 50 pesos as promised (Padilla, 1969). Many of the trainees were killed by Filipino troops as a result of the rebellion. However, one of the trainees named Jibin Arula (Manila Broadens Mutiny Inquiries, 1968) managed to escape from the island and sought protection from Governor Delfin Montano of the Cavite Region who was an opponent to the Philippine administration (FCO 24/260, 1968). There was also a claim that about 100 trainees who survived the incident had fled to Sabah to avoid being hunted by Filipino troops (Maglana, 1969).

On the other hand, the Philippine government testified a different story about the secret military training. One of the first explanations given by the Department of Defense of the Philippines and President Marcos himself was that the camp was merely a regular training camp specially dedicated for counter-insurgency training (FCO 24/260, 1968). Given the fact that most of the trainees were from Muslim communities, particularly the Suluk people, the Philippine government then said that it was purposely meant to counter the rebellion in the Muslim community province. In another explanation, the Philippines in its official statement also issued an account contrary to the previous one. Among others, the Philippines claimed that the purpose of the military training at the Corregidor Island was to combat the communist movement in the southern Philippines (FCO 15/302, 1968; Manila Broadens Mutiny Inquiries, 1968).

As a result of the subversive attack, the newly-established Malaysian government made incessant requests to the British government to provide defense assistance as stipulated in the Anglo-Malaysian Defense Agreement (AMDA) of which was previously known as the Anglo-Malayan Defense Agreement. This agreement was signed on 12 October 1957 between the Federation of Malaya and the United Kingdom with additional defense assistance from Australia and New Zealand. According to the AMDA, Britain was required to provide "expert advice and assistance in operational and technical matters" as listed in Annex 1. Another significant article in the agreement was "Article X" which stipulated that "the Government of United Kingdom undertakes to afford to the Government of the Federation of Malaysia such assistance as the Government of the Federation of Malaysia may require for the external defense of its territory" (Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement, 1957). Despite the numerous reports presented by the Malaysian government regarding the subversive activities in Sabah before the Corregidor incident, Britain was still reluctant to believe the accounts as part of their stonewall strategy to avoid from giving defense assistance as promised in the above-mentioned articles in the AMDA. It was only after the Corregidor incident was revealed that Britain showed its condemnation towards the brutal act and regarded it as "villainy of the Filipinos" (FCO 15/303, 1968).

## **2. Problem Statement**

After many centuries of colonialism in Malaya, British through its decolonisation process eventually let the Malayan Federation become an independent country which later formed the country of Malaysia together with Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore in September 1963. This development also thrusts the British government with the responsibility to provide the essential economic and defense assistance needed by the Malaysian government until it can self-govern. One of the important agreements between Malaysia and the British government was the Anglo-Malaysian Defense Agreement (AMDA) which later caused a great irritation and "headache" to the British government, so much so that they decided to repeal the agreement. Evidently, the declension by the British government to provide defense assistance through the above-mentioned agreement was clearly shown when the Malaysian government had continuously asked for greater defense assistance after the discovery of the Philippines' secret plan to attack Sabah as well as a series of subversive attacks by the Filipinos. The insistence had brought about the British government to a stalemate and dilemma since they wanted to maintain harmonic diplomatic relations with the Philippine government whilst at the same time, fulfil their promise to Malaya as stipulated in the AMDA.

## **3. Research Questions**

The main research question of this study is to what extent did the British government made use of the stonewall strategy to minimise its defense assistance to Malaysia? Accordingly, the second question asked is what kinds of approach or measures were taken by the British government to maintain good relations with Malaysia and the Philippines with regards to the Corregidor crisis?

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

This study aims to examine the slick diplomacy and stonewall strategy used by the British government to make sure that they were not accused for not fulfilling their part of the promise in the AMDA whilst at the same time, preserve their favourable relations with the Philippines.

#### **5. Research Methods**

This paper is qualitative in nature and had thus employed the method of analysing documents in order to answer the research questions. The focus of this method is by analysing British historical records especially the Colonial Office (CO), Foreign Office (FO), Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Dominion Office (DO) records. These primary sources are very crucial in order to analyse the British's stonewall strategy since their policy was mainly influenced by the British diplomats who had direct contact with both the Malaysian and Philippine governments. Other primary sources used in this study include reports, acts, agreements documents, correspondence, and newspaper clippings. This study applied a diplomatic historical approach that primarily discusses the history of bilateral and multilateral relations. This approach focuses on foreign relations policy and its impact on domestic and foreign developments.

#### **6. Findings**

On 1 April 1968, Tunku Abdul Rahman sent an official letter to the British Prime Minister, seeking for defense assistance in Sabah to deal with the Philippine attack. Initially, Tunku did not expect that there will be an invasion by the Philippines army so much so that he made a statement that the Malaysian security forces alone could deal with the subversive movement without any hassle (FCO 15/303, 1968). Nevertheless, after many apprehensions following the subversive activities, Tunku called for Britain's help to provide military aid and expertise to aid Malaysia in strengthening Sabah's defense, especially in areas that were highly vulnerable to intrusions by Filipino invaders (FCO 24/256, 1968). Tunku's message was delivered through a letter written by Abdul Jamil Abdul Rais, the Malaysian High Commissioner in London. In his letter, he mentioned:

*It is my view that the Philippine subversion is serious enough to warrant my plea for British help to protect the security of this region of Asia against infiltration by enemy forces. Recent events have shown that the Philippines have made preparation to send infiltrators here. In the circumstances I feel it is urgent that we should build up defences in areas open to such infiltration. We need help of your military experts to enable us plan these defences. I will appropriate an immediate response so that we could initiate action here to prepare the groundwork. (FCO 15/303, 1968, p. 49)*

Tunku's letter, however, was received with a prejudice response by the British government since they were actually reluctant to give any military assistance to avoid from being seen as supporting Malaysia in the midst of the Malaysia – Philippines crisis. In order to maintain their cordial relations with the

Philippines, the British government used stonewall tactics and strategies to eschew from their promises made to Malaysia in the AMDA agreement.

### **6.1. Scepticism towards the Reports**

At the beginning, British refused to believe that the Philippine government was responsible for the existence of the training camp despite the abundance and continuous evidence reported by the Malaysian government. In fact, Malaysia had already presented a concrete report to the British government regarding the activities at the Simunul Island camp, but it was very difficult for the British to believe the legality of the report until the incident in Corregidor was uncovered (FCO 24/260, 1968). Many arguments were laid to refute such reports. Britain did not completely trust the intelligence from Malaysia. This stand was clearly showed by many British diplomats, including the British official stationed in Manila. In his letter, he stated:

*But the real point is how significant is this activity, if it exists, and how seriously should the Malaysians take it. Our view is that it need not be taken seriously...We believe that he (the Philippines' president) has put the Sabah issue into cold storage for the moment and would probably like to drop it altogether...so far as the Malaysians are concerned, is that the doves are in control and, in our view, they should not get unnecessarily fussed about a few clandestine and apparently insignificant hawk-like activities in the background...if these clandestine activities were to assume any size or significance, the matter would undoubtedly become public knowledge and would become the subject of press discussion. (FCO 15/303, 1968, p. 24)*

The above-mentioned statement by the British ambassador to Manila on 7 March 1968 clearly illustrated that he was very sceptical of Malaysia's response towards subversive activities in Sabah by exaggerating the issue. Britain's stand to dismiss the Malaysian authorities' reports was likely linked with their perception to not entirely trust the Malaysian authorities' sensibility in handling investigations and their belief that the Malaysian authorities might be over prejudiced with anything related to the Filipino people in Sabah since they were more concerned about their country's security. Nevertheless, an account regarding the subversive activities was also reported by the British's own diplomat in Sabah, Tom Duffy. In one of the Special Branch's confidential reports received by Tom Duffy, the British Deputy Commissioner in Sabah, he revealed that on 16 March 1968 there were Philippines invaders who landed at Pulau Banggi in the northern part of Kudat (FCO 15/303, 1968). According to Duffy's informant, the presence of the Filipinos at Sabah was to recruit Filipinos living in Sabah in the military exercises held on the Island of Palawan (FCO 15/303, 1968). Following the report, another statement was received that a total of 13 Filipinos living on the island of Manani located north west of Kota Belud were reported to be relocated from the island to an unknown location (FCO 15/303, 1968). These reports by Britain's own officials made clear that the Malaysian government was still sensible with their investigations while being highly vigilant towards any threat that may be caused by the Filipinos. In fact, a series of arrests of Filipino invaders, including members of the Philippines Special Force were reported multiple times following the Jabidah Massacre (FCO 15/302, 1968).

Besides being doubtful of Malaysia's arguments and reports, Britain also used the ambiguity of the Filipino invaders' apprehension as evidence that Malaysia was uncertain of the subversive attacks. This problem was quoted during the arrest of three armed Filipinos by the Sabahan authorities on the count of encroachment and alleged mission of attacking Malaysia. In response, the Philippines claimed that all the detained Filipinos were just ordinary residents living in Sabah (FCO 24/260). This situation clearly proves that although there were a few reports of attacks and invasions by Filipinos, it was very difficult for Malaysia to provide concrete proof since the Filipinos themselves are also considered Sabahan who stay alternately between Sabah and Sulu. The conflict became worse when the Malaysian authorities began to conduct a thorough patrol around Sabah's maritime boundaries so much so that every suspicious mariner, especially those who did not have identification cards and possess firearms were thoroughly checked. There were many occasions where the Malaysian authorities apprehended suspicious Filipinos who tried to cross the Malaysian maritime boundary without any legal document. These include the detainment of the Philippines' military boats in two separate series of events on 28 March 1968 and 6 April 1968.

## **6.2. Questioning Tunku's Real Motive for Requesting Defense Assistance and Giving Strict Conditions**

In a letter written by an officer at the British Foreign Office, R. B. Dorman to Brooke Turner, he warned about a great danger that the British government would face if they follow Malaysia's request (FCO 15/303, 1968). He also added that Malaysia would certainly disclose to the public that the British government has been actively shielding them from the Philippines' armed attack on Sabah. Such act will not only give shame to Britain, but also affect its relationship with the Philippines (FCO 15/303, 1968). Furthermore, he also described the act as a deliberate propaganda planned by Malaysia with certain intentions or interests in order to achieve its implicit agenda. Dorman also emphasised that Britain should always be aware of its own interests and priorities, especially with regards to their growing export trade with the Philippines. He was very irritated by Tunku's idea and rhetoric, claiming that the cities in Sabah were facing a serious threat from the Philippines' air force (FCO 15/303, 1968). Therefore, he suggested that the British government should discuss the matter thoroughly if they chose to both refuse to provide arms assistance to Malaysia but at the same time, do not want to be seen as being deliberately unwilling to do so.

Based on that view, he suggested that discussions on this matter should be made out of the context of the Philippines - Sabah crisis. Two main points were outlined by Dorman to achieve this goal. Firstly, the discussion should involve the "Five Power Talks" framework which takes into account the importance of harmonic relations with regional countries (FCO 15/303, 1968). The Five Power Talks were negotiations involving Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia and Singapore to strengthen the security and defense of the Southeast Asian region. Secondly, clarification should be given to Malaysia that although Britain was working to provide defense assistance to aid the weak defense forces in Sabah, the British government clearly and firmly disagreed with Malaysia's views which overemphasised on the danger caused by the Philippines' air strikes. Moreover, the British opined that aid in the form of firearms together with British instructors will certainly exacerbate the existing situation, which was detrimental to Britain's great hope of seeing cordial relations between Malaysia and the Philippines. Therefore, Britain's willingness

to provide arms and instructors, according to Dorman, must be preceded by the fact that Kuala Lumpur itself should not move from Peninsular Malaysia (FCO 15/303, 1968).

In addition to ground defense aid, Malaysia also sought air defense aid from the British government; however, the request was received with prejudice and negative responses by British officials who gave a firm reminder to the British government to not be so lenient with the request if they did not want Britain's own image to be affected. A British Foreign Office diplomat, D. F. Murray was among the earliest officials who expressed his distrust and suspicions over Tunku's real motives for seeking military assistance from Britain. In his letter, he mentioned "It could be well that Tunku has some ulterior motive in seeking our help, such as testing our attitude towards the defence agreement before the Five Power talks in June". Since the beginning, Tunku was already aware of the British government's reluctance of continuing their assistance to Malaysia. This was evident through Tunku's statement, "our defense agreements with Britain are not perpetual or permanent. They can be revoked by either party" (DO 169/276, 1963).

Despite the prejudice shown by some British officers, there were also a few who rejected such negative views towards the Malaysian government, including the British Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur. In response to Murray's view, the British Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur said:

*The Malaysians appear to be increasingly worried about the threat from the Philippines and that we should not exclude the possibility that they genuinely feel a need for help from us in planning to meet it. There is also a possibility that the Tunku may feel that if the Filipinos wish to press the Sabah claim it is to the Malaysian advantage to bring this out into the open while the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement is still in operation. (FCO 15/303, 1968, p. 29)*

This rational and unbiased remarks were also supported by the Commonwealth Office which considered Tunku's request to be reasonable to avoid any further implications in the future.

### **6.3. Making a Strong Asseveration and Conducting a Thorough Investigation**

Besides showing scepticism to the reports and questioning Tunku's real motive of requesting for defense assistance, Britain also made a strong asseveration regarding its defense assistance policy and conducted a thorough investigation about the level of security threats in Sabah. After realising the fact that the AMDA will only cause problems to the British government, they then made a strong asseveration regarding the policy of the defense assistance and found ways and basis to avoid from providing defense assistance to Malaysia. This rhetoric was conspicuously mentioned by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the British Commonwealth Office during the meeting of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers in 1969. A part of the excerpt is as follows:

*...if there is an armed attack against Malaysia, we have a clear obligation to cooperate with you in meeting it and if a military threat develops there is a clear obligation to consult with you about measures to meet it. However, no armed attack has taken place nor are we ourselves convinced that there is a real threat of one. In these circumstances, there could not, in our view, be any question of an automatic military response on our part to a request for assistance at some future time. (FCO 24/497, 1969, p. 207)*

In order to decide whether or not to accept Tunku's request, Britain appointed the Commander-in-Chief of the Far East to discuss with Tunku to make sure that Malaysia was completely threatened by the Philippines attacks (FCO 15/303,1968).

#### **6.4. Became A Peacemaker to Restore Diplomatic Relations Between Malaysia and the Philippines**

The sabre-rattling acts by the Philippines as well as Malaysia's requests for defense assistance through the AMDA were very alarming to the British government. Thus, the British government worked hard to find ways to ensure that the Philippines and Malaysia relations will not get worse before the Philippines decides to break diplomatic relations with Malaysia. Furthermore, the British government was worried if Malaysia will continue to push them to fulfil their promise in the AMDA (FCO 15/305, 1968). The British Defense Minister also pointed out that there will be no single visit by any British defense officer to Sabah during the Philippines-Sabah crisis (FCO 15/303, 1968). The decision was made to prevent the situation from getting worse and give any possible misconceptions about the status of their presence in Sabah by the Philippine government.

Despite all of the stonewall measures and tactics taken, Britain eventually compelled to the request for defense assistance by the Malaysian government and had to adhere to the promises they made through the AMDA. Nevertheless, this decision was made under very strict conditions and only limited to certain aspects of defense assistance. In his reply to Tunku's letter, the Prime Minister of Britain wrote:

*As regards the planning assistance for which you asked in your message, I have arranged for our Commander-In-Chief Far East to be instructed to get in touch at once with the Malaysian authorities to establish precisely what is required. I am very sorry that relations between Malaysia and the Philippines should have come under strain. It had seemed to me that the understanding relationship which had been built up between Malaysia and the Philippines in the recent period and to which you had contributed so much yourself – was making an important contribution to the peace and stability of Southeast Asia. I earnestly hope that everything possible will be done to restore this friendship. You may like to know that we shall also be expressing to the Government of the Philippines, through diplomatic channel, our concern that this present affair should soon be resolved. (FCO 15/303, 1968, p. 55)*

In a discussion at the Defense Ministry of Britain, Britain agreed to provide defense assistance to Malaysia. However, Britain also emphasised that the granting of such assistance must be done in a very careful manner in order to prevent it from reaching the knowledge of the Philippine government. The Commonwealth Office had also warned the British High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur to “please make it clear to the Tunku that the Philippine Government should have no indication that we are offering this assistance to the Malaysian Government” (FCO 15/303, 12 April 1968). On other note, Tunku accepted the offer but said, "but they'll find out, they have spies all over Sabah" (FCO 15/303, 1968).

Tunku's reaction was indeed true since the Philippine government was ready with any possible response from both the Britain and Malaysian governments. The Philippine government was already aware

of the presence of Britain and Australian troops which tried to help strengthened Malaysia's defense. President Marcos in his speech on this matter had condemned Britain's actions for entering the waters of the Philippines. He also pointed out that Britain as a SEATO partner should show a more responsible attitude and not to use violence (Ferdinand Marcos, 1978; Long Live SEATO, 1969).

## 7. Conclusion

The continuity and changing trend of the Philippines' claims to Sabah had not only transformed into a more radical approach that led to the disruption of the bilateral relations, but it also caused a serious threat towards the security and sovereignty of the nation, especially Malaysia. In this regard, although Britain has strong ties with Malaysia under the AMDA and based on its national interest, Britain was well aware that their relationship with the Philippines was also important since they were both allies in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). As a corollary to this, if Britain had fulfilled Tunku's request, it will clearly illustrate that they were indeed in favour of Malaysia. However, Britain finally had to adhere to their promises made through the AMDA by providing very minimal defense assistance with strict conditions to Malaysia. One of the defense favours given by Britain to Malaysia in order to safeguard Sabah from any attack was by helping to build an anti-aircraft battery (FCO 24/258, 1968). At the peak of the crisis, President Marcos eventually made a personal appeal to the Malaysian Ambassador in the Philippines asking for help from the Malaysian government to find a way out for him. The Philippines also pledged to provide all the documents and secret files related to the military training in Corregidor Island to the Malaysian Ambassador for further investigation purposes.

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