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2013

Ong, W., & Kumar Ramakrishna. (2013). The second emergency (1968-1989) : a reassessment of CPM' s armed revolution. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 191). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/104371>

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No. 191/2013 dated 10 October 2013

The Second Emergency (1968-1989): A Reassessment of CPM's Armed Revolution

By Ong Weichong & Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

While the CPM story is closely associated with the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960, there is a 'forgotten' but equally significant sequel to the CPM insurgency: the Second Emergency from 1968-1989. That failed because the CPM lost the battle for hearts and minds.

Commentary

THE ONGOING debate over the historic role of Chin Peng, the recently deceased Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) Secretary-General, has thus far tended to focus attention on his actions during the years 1948 to 1960, known as the Malayan Emergency. What has been less discussed is the CPM's re-launched armed struggle in 1968.

This second phase, sometimes called the Second Emergency, dragged on till the final formal cessation of hostilities in 1989. The CPM's revived armed struggle actually posed a serious security threat that required the combined efforts and resources of the Malaysian, Thai and Singapore governments to resolve.

Strategic Backdrop: The Cold War

The Cold War was at its height when Malaya gained formal independence from Great Britain in August 1957 and Singapore merged with the newly inaugurated Federation of Malaysia in September 1963, before separating from the larger political unit in August 1965. In October 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis had brought the nuclear-armed United States and the Soviet Union to the very brink of thermonuclear war. The Soviet and Chinese Communists were in essence engaged in zero-sum geopolitical competition for world domination with the Western bloc led by the US.

Southeast Asia, given its strategic location astride major world sea-lanes and rich in resources, was a strategic theatre of the Cold War. The year Singapore left the Federation, the Americans were escalating their combat presence in South Vietnam to hold the line against Ho Chi Minh's Soviet and Chinese-supplied North, while in Indonesia President Sukarno was flirting with the Indonesian Communists who later embarked on a failed coup that was crushed by the fiercely anti-Communist General Suharto.

CPM Strategy in the Second Emergency

Against this turbulent backdrop, the CPM was gradually gathering its resources for a renewed armed revolt against Singapore and Malaysia, which they regarded as not independent and sovereign states but British “neo-colonies”. They remained utterly determined to destroy both governments and establish a “Malayan People’s Republic” despite both countries having constitutionally-elected governments. By 1968, the year of the politically and psychologically – if not tactically - successful Tet Offensive by Communist forces in South Vietnam, the CPM decided that the time was ripe to resume hostilities.

Between 1968 and 1973 CPM groups infiltrated back into Peninsular Malaysia and quietly re-established an underground support network. 1974 then saw an upsurge in CPM terrorism including assassinations, sabotage and bombings against government installations and personnel on both sides of the Causeway. Such action included the high-profile assassination of Tan Sri Abdul Rahman bin Hashim, Inspector-General of the Malaysian Police.

The Second Emergency gradually developed into a low-intensity campaign of subversion and counter-subversion in Singapore and sporadic jungle skirmishes in Malaysia. By 1988, the jungle war had gone against the CPM and its underground network had collapsed. Chin Peng agreed to a peace treaty to formally end the Second Emergency a year later.

Why the CPM failed

The CPM’s eventual denouement was long in coming actually. There were sound domestic and geopolitical reasons for this. Domestically, as in the First Emergency, the CPM’s recurring tendency to shoot itself in the foot again played a part. By August 1974, the Party had sundered into three different factions that sought to outdo each other in open bloody battles with the Malaysian government and amongst themselves, destabilising its painstakingly built-up support network in the process.

Such infighting gravely undercut the CPM’s overall ability to win the hearts and minds of key sections of the Malaysian population. They ultimately failed to win control of the largely rural Malay enclaves of the strategically vital northern Malaysian States of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis, thanks in part to counter-productive Communist violence, effective security force action and the government’s development policies.

To be sure, experienced Communist units in the northern Malaysian jungles did carry the day in some tactical engagements with security forces. These did little, however, to win the one battle that truly mattered – the confidence of the rural Malays, the strategic centre of gravity of the Second Emergency.

In Singapore the Communists were caught out by the government’s increasingly successful policies to promote social mobility and rapid economic growth. Fundamentally, the Communists failed to sink roots amongst the wider publics in both countries because of a historic failing: its penchant for ill-conceived violence, this time fuelled by the internal Party split.

Further, its propaganda claims that Malaysia and Singapore are “neo-colonies” and that they were fighting to “free” what were to all intents and purposes fully independent countries, sounded hollow and incredible. They were not seen as “freedom-fighters” but communist terrorists. It was clear that the peoples of both countries had moved on while the CPM leadership was still caught in a time warp.

Geopolitical turn for the worse

Geopolitically, the CPM’s fortunes began to turn for the worse as early as 1969, when the historic Sino-Soviet split profoundly shook global Communism to its very foundations. By 1972, the People’s Republic of China had begun tentative moves toward diplomatic rapprochement with non-communist Southeast Asia. A huge turning point came in 1974 when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai conceded that the CPM was an internal problem for Malaysia.

Six years later, the extremely shrewd and pragmatic Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping cut off material and financial support for the CPM and other “fraternal communist parties” in return for enhanced bilateral relations with non-communist Southeast Asia.

While the Chinese continued to support CPM radio propaganda broadcasts to Malaysia and Singapore until 1981, this was of little practical consequence to Chin Peng and his followers. Worse, unlike the ultimately victorious North Vietnamese Communists, the CPM consistently failed to elicit any substantial Sino-Soviet material support or lobbying assistance on the international stage.

By the mid-1980s, that global Communist ideological, political and economic influence was in relative decline was patently obvious to Chinese and Soviet leaders even if they would not declare it publicly. Little surprise that

the same year the Berlin Wall fell – 1989 – Chin Peng sued for peace.

The revived Communist insurgency in Malaysia and Singapore lasted in all about 40 years and undoubtedly proved to be a national trauma for both countries, whose political and psychological effects linger to this day. But against the grand sweep of history, it was in the end a footnote in what the American scholar and former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski once called the “Grand Failure” - of Global Communism.

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