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THE PATH TO MALAYSIA'S NEUTRAL FOREIGN POLICY IN THE TUNKU ERA

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Abstract

During the era of Malaya/Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, or Tunku as he is commonly referred to, the country was inclined to adopt a neutral foreign policy in the early years of post-independence. Along with other senior ministers, the Tunku's stance on communism was soft even before Malaya won independence from the British in 1957. However, domestic and international situations at the time did not allow the government to fully implement a neutral foreign policy until the mid-sixties. With the establishment of diplomatic relations with communist countries that included Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, Romania and Bulgaria, the government shifted from a pro-Western policy to a neutral foreign policy nearing the end of the Tunku's premiership. It was the Tunku, and not his successor Tun Abdul Razak, who was the pioneer in steering the country towards a neutral course.

Keywords: Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Neutralization, Foreign policy, Communism

Introduction

Neutralism emerged in Europe, especially among the smaller nations, at the beginning of the nineteenth century as an option to protect national sovereignty against incursion by the major powers. By the mid-twentieth century, the concept had pervaded well into Asia. As Peter Lyon puts it, neutralism was almost ubiquitous in Southeast Asia in one form or another (Lyon 1969: 161), with its official adoption by Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar in the 1960s. The new government of Malaya was in a position to choose a neutral policy when the country achieved independence from the British in 1957, but found it inexpedient to do so. Malaysia's neutral foreign policy came to the fore only in 1970 when the concept of a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) was officially proposed to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) by the second Prime Minister, Tun Razak. However, the cornerstone of the neutral policy had been laid earlier, and its origins can be traced back to the period when the Tunku was premier. This article traces the path of the neutral foreign policy of Malaya/Malaysia in the Tunku era.

There had been early indications that the Tunku administration was shifting from its pro-Western oriented policy and inclining towards neutrality. Analyzing Malaya/Malaysia's records of voting on resolutions in the United Nations, Robert Tilman argued that the foreign

policy of Malaya/Malaysia was 'a committed neutral' in the Tunku era (Tilman 1967). Johan Saravanamuttu also contended that 'it was *Konfrontasi* that brought about a softening of Malaysia's hard line anti-communist policy in the long run.' He also suggested that this softening led to the eventual formulation of a neutral foreign policy (Saravanamuttu 2010: 89). Along the same lines, Dick Wilson had earlier opined that *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation), launched in 1963 by President Sukarno of Indonesia, compelled the government of Malaysia to shift to a new perspective of world politics. After *Konfrontasi* ended in 1966, and especially from 1968 onwards, 'there is a new phase in which the road towards nonalignment and neutrality is much more positively taken' (Wilson 1975: 63, 65). Chandran Jeshurun described this phase as a measured transition and paradigm shift from *Konfrontasi* to the last years of the Tunku's administration. Although Chandran did not refer specifically to a policy of neutrality, he believed that *Konfrontasi* 'would not only force a paradigm shift in Malaysia's foreign policy, it would greatly accelerate the overall process of change' (Jeshurun 2007: 53). In analyzing the development of ZOPFAN, Bilveer Singh maintained that 'Malaysia's foreign policy has undergone a fundamental shift from being an avidly anti-communist, pro-Western state'. He attributed this shift to the initiative that was taken by Tun Dr. Ismail in 1968 (Singh 1992: 25-26). While most of the above scholars argued that the foreign policy had shifted during the premiership of the Tunku, scant attention has been paid to how the policy was gradually shifted from its earlier pro-Western stance.

This article sheds light on the Tunku's thinking and view because it was he who was the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Malaya/Malaysia at the time. In the Tunku era, Malaya/Malaysia's foreign policy was developed and formulated by the Tunku himself, his deputy Tun Razak, and few other key members of the government. However, it was essentially the Tunku who was mainly responsible for the ideas and opinions that would greatly influence the formulation of the foreign policy in later years (Tilman 1967; Silcock 1963; Ott 1972; Abdullah Ahmad 1985; and Jeshurun 2007). His view on the nation's foreign policy, therefore, would be key to any analysis on how the shift to neutrality came fully to fruition after his tenure as the Prime Minister.

The first section of this article focuses on the Tunku's views on communism. It is important to examine here what the Tunku said and thought because of its impact on the country's foreign policy. In addition, we will see how other government officers who influenced the formulation of foreign policy thought of communism, both as a political ideology and as a threat to national security. Studying their views would help in understanding why Malaysia finally steered the neutral course. The next section analyzes why the new government preferred a pro-Western policy in the early years of post-independence in spite of the fact that it had the option to adopt a neutral foreign policy from the outset. The article further examines whether the government had considered adopting a policy of neutrality from independence in 1957 to the middle of the sixties. It is partly because, as Ghazali Shafie said, Malaya adopted the principles of the Afro-Asian Conference in 1955, which inspired among African and Asian states to the Non-Aligned Movement, as the main covenants and principles for its well-being and intercourse with other nations (Ghazali 1982: 43). While Malayan leaders were unable to attend the conference because Malaya was not independent, the spirit of the conference did, in fact, influence the political leaders of Malaya and the formulation of Malaya's foreign policy when independence arrived. Malaysia, which had earlier adopted a pro-Western foreign policy, started adjusting its foreign policy that saw a balance in its relations with the West and with the Soviet bloc in the midst of the Cold War. At the second half of the 1960s, formal diplomatic relations were gradually established with various communist countries. The last section of this article focuses on the period towards the end of the Tunku's administration in 1970 that capped a journey that took the country from one that was unequivocally Pro-Western to a state that espoused neutrality.

The Tunku's Stance on Communism

When the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) unleashed its reign of terror in 1948, the then British government declared a state of Emergency in Malaya. This remained in force till 1960, even after the country gained independence in 1957. Militant members of the MCP killed thousands of local civilians during the Emergency, thus arousing considerable public animosity against them. Nevertheless, the Tunku had a liberal stance on communism and the stance was evident even in the early years of his political career. As the Chief Minister of Malaya before independence, the Tunku held a meeting with Chin Peng, the head of the MCP in Baling, Kedah in 1955, during which he stated his stance on communism. The purpose of this meeting before independence was to persuade the communists to renounce violence and to disarm. The Tunku declared that the MCP would not be accepted 'as lawful and legitimate after the damage they (MCP) have done to the people and the country' (Tunku Abdul Rahman 1977: 13). When Chin Peng argued that the Communist Party of Australia was functioning legally, the Tunku retorted that '[t]he communists were not pressing armed struggle in Australia' (Chin Peng 2003: 380) and further said: 'We don't mind…the communist ideology, so far as you don't preach violence. In our country, quite a lot of people are communist theorists dedicated to communist ideology but they didn't carry out any violence, so we allowed them' (Chin and Hack 2004: 175-176). As this statement was from a recollection by Chin Peng, one might be tempted to treat it with some reservation, but the Tunku himself had reiterated it in later years:

> I am not anti-communist *per se*. I am only against those Communist countries who try through subversive and militant means to export the ideology to our country. In this way I am anti-communist. I am not anti-communism if they keep their ideology within their borders.
>
> (Abdullah Ahmad 1985:5; Kua 2002: 99-101)

This clearly tells us that while the Tunku strongly opposed the use of militant forces to overturn the government, he was essentially not against communism. On the contrary, the Tunku mentioned that 'If perchance… we find some particular method of the Communists can be adopted for the good of our Nation and State, we shall not hesitate to adopt that method' (Memorial Tunku Abdul Rahman P/U. 236). If he were truly anti-communist and a hardliner against communism, he would have not said this. Other senior government officials who influenced the foreign policy of Malaya also had similar liberal views on communism as the Tunku. During the period of his ambassadorship to the United Nations and the United States, Tun Dr. Ismail also expressed similar views in public, stating that Malaya 'is the only country in the world today which is involved in a shooting war with adherents of communism.' However, it was essentially 'militant communism' and 'communist terrorism' (Tawfik and Ooi 2009: 106-107) that he was against. In this respect, Tun Dr. Ismail's position on communism was clear when he reiterated in parliament a year later: 'We are not against communism as an ideology, although we ourselves believe in democracy. But we are against its militant form and those countries practicing it, and through subversive and militant means try to export this ideology to other countries' (Federation of Malaysia, Parliamentary debates, 20 June 1966, col. 865). Interestingly enough, his view of communism and his differentiating between ideology and militancy echoed the Tunku's stance in 1955. The Tunku was at least one who had liberality towards communism, although his speeches and statements were often erroneously referred to as 'anti-communist' in the media. Tun Dr.Ismail had also a tolerant and understanding attitude towards communism, accepting communism as a dogma. Although the political leaders often mentioned the phrase 'anti-communism' in public, it would be more appropriate and correct to

say that their stance was not 'anti-communist,' but actually 'anti-militant communist' or more simply 'anti-terrorist.'

Adoption of a Pro-Western Policy in Post-Independence Malaya

Many researchers on Malaysian foreign policy and international relations argue that the government adopted a pro-Western foreign policy from the outset of independence. As a matter of fact, it had to do so because of three main reasons. The first reason was that the MCP still conducted terrorist activities after Malaya achieved independence in 1957. The State of Emergency, which was declared by the then British government in 1948, remained in force till 1960, though the Prime Minister had targeted an end to the war with militant communists by 31st August 1958 (Tunku Abdul Rahman 1984: 219). The communists were responsible for the loss of about 11,000 lives by the end of the Emergency (Milne and Mauzy 1978:31). For this reason, the Tunku said that in fighting militant communism, the government 'has spent millions of dollars and has sacrificed hundreds of its people,' so that 'there is no question whatsoever of our adopting a neutral policy when we are at war with the Communists' (Federation of Malaya, Parliamentary debates, 6 December 1958, col. 5543-5545). It was under these circumstances that neutrality was set aside. Amidst the war with local communist terrorists, the government also regarded mainland China as a threat because it knew the MCP was supported by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Tun Dr. Ismail expressed deep concerns in the middle of the 1960s that 'the communist challenge, centred in Peking, is a total challenge that poses a total threat to South-East Asia' (*Foreign Affairs Malaysia* 1966: 69). The domestic militant communist group was linked to the CCP and it was thus risky for the government to adopt a neutral foreign policy under such circumstances.

The second reason was that the small Malayan defence forces were not in a position to defend and secure the new nation adequately when independence was granted. As the size of the Malayan military in 1957 was 'an army of less than one division in strength,' 'no air force, not even a single plane,' 'no navy, not even a single sailor' and 'not even a sea-going craft' (Federation of Malaya, Parliamentary debates, 2 Oct. 1957, col. 3282), the new nation 'cannot stand alone' (Federation of Malaya, Parliamentary debates, 2 Oct. 1957, col. 3283) for its own national defence and security. Thus, it would have been difficult to defeat the armed communist group without help from the United Kingdom. Arising from this, Malaya signed and ratified the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA) for a security alliance with the British in 1957.

Lastly, in relevance to the second reason, the government's decision in limiting funds to national defence meant that its armed forces could not be increased. In a press conference immediately before independence in 1957, the Tunku said that the government did not 'intend to devote much money on defence' because it planned to provide for improvement in economy, standard of living, education, health and infrastructure (Tunku Abdul Rahman 1984:216). The government resolved to establish a solid foundation for the nation-state and attempted to ensure good living standards for all Malayan citizens. It was also crucial to alienate the Chinese from the MCP. By increasing domestic economic power and improving national education and social welfare, the new government tried to create in its citizens, especially the Chinese who had supported the militant communists, a sense of loyalty to the nation. It was inevitable to contribute funds to conduct nation-building.

Although the above domestic factors led the government to adopt a pro-Western foreign policy, it does not mean that the government did not consider at all the pursuit of a neutral foreign policy. The Tunku noted that embarking on a neutral foreign policy would be difficult, pointing out that 'if we agree with the other, another country would run us down and create

enmity in this country' (Federation of Malaya, Parliamentary debates, 9 Dec. 1957, col. 3710). Tun Dr. Ismail, the then ambassador to the United Nations and United States, also commented in his diary in 1958: 'To implement the policy of neutralism is not easy. It requires constant vigilance and fine judgment. Otherwise, she would be accused of neutralism partial to certain countries' (His unpublished diary in 14-21 July, 1958; Tawfik and Ooi 2009:87). Hence, both the Tunku and Tun Dr. Ismail agreed that it was difficult to implement a neutral policy. Nevertheless, one must take cognizance of the fact that these two top politicians had pondered over the possibility of pursuing a neutral foreign policy in the early years of post-independence, even though they both concluded that the time was not ripe for such a policy to be adopted by the new nation.

The Emergency was declared to subdue and eliminate the militant communists. Although it was the main stumbling block to the road to neutrality, the government did not adopt a neutral foreign policy even after the Emergency was lifted in 1960. On the contrary, political leaders emphasized that the nation's policy was not neutral. While the Tunku, as in the past, had said that 'Malaya herself was not neutral' (*The Straits Times*, 7 Dec. 1960: 11), Ghazalie Shafie, the Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also stressed that '[i]t is neither pro-West nor pro-East nor is it neutral in a positive or any other sense' (*The Straits Times,* 31 Aug. 1960: 8). Though the government had successfully eliminated militant communists in the country, its vigilance against the expansionism of China remained the main factor shaping its foreign policy. At the end of 1962, the Tunku offered this explanation when his foreign policy was criticized by the opposition party in the parliament: '[o]ur foreign policy is... neutral to the extent that we understand the meaning of the word neutral.' He also added that '[w]here there has been a conflict between democracy and communism, we side with the West and the Western understanding of democracy' (*Berita Harian*, 15 Dec. 1962, p. 1, and *The Straits Times*, 15 Dec. 1962: 6). Nevertheless, after Indonesia launched *Konfrontasi*, the government of Malaya had no choice but to remain pro-Western because the president of Indonesia, Sukarno, was believed to be strongly influenced by the CCP through *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI), which was growing in strength in Indonesian politics (*The Straits Times*, 16 Jan. 1965:1). The Tunku called Indonesia '[t]he Communist-inspired régime of Soekarno' (Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1977b: 568). Indonesia itself posed a serious threat to Malaya, and so the introduction of the neutral policy during the period of *Konfrontasi* was out of the question. It was no accident that government officers hardly ever brought up the issue of neutrality in public during this period.

After the transition in leadership was made from Sukarno to Suharto, the new government of Indonesia dissolved and banned the PKI and the related parties in March 1966. Eventually, the Tunku spoke out that 'it had always been the policy of the Government to take a neutral stand in the field of international relations' (*The Straits Times*, 12 April 1966: 13). The end of *Konfrontasi* marked a gradual shift from a pro-Western policy towards a neutral foreign policy. As Indonesia which posed serious threat is the biggest neighbouring country, the government had determined not to take a neutral policy in the period of *Konfrontasi*.

While Malaysia's leaning towards neutrality became more apparent only from the mid-1960s, the country had, from 1957, maintained a neutral stance on the representation of China in the United Nations. Its initial stance was to recognize neither China nor Taiwan in the global organization. The Tunku regarded the issue of Chinese representation in the United Nations as 'home policy and not foreign policy,' and explained: 'We are fighting against the Reds. How then can we vote to admit them?' (*The Straits Times,* 29 Sept. 1957: 11). The Tunku thus clearly stated his neutrality on this issue in not recognizing Red China or Formosa (currently Taiwan) (*The Straits Times,* 26 Nov. 1957:7). In its refusal to endorse the representation seat of both China and Taiwan in the United Nations, Malaysia maintained a certain distance between Eastern and Western camps to avoid being embroiled in international conflicts. At the same time, its neutral stance was also necessary because of a domestic factor, namely the fact that Malaya

had a sizeable Chinese population. If the government had sided with one camp, it might have caused instability in domestic politics. Thus, it was inevitable for the government to avoid a spillover from the international conflict to the domestic scene. Nevertheless, the Tunku did not hesitate to criticize China for 'the acts of terrorism committed in this country' (*The Straits Times,* 1 May 1958: 9). Tun Dr. Ismail, the then ambassador to the United Nations, also indirectly blamed China's propaganda in the General Assembly (United Nations General Assembly, 821st plenary meeting, 5 Oct. 1959: 365).

The government's stance on the China issue in the United Nations changed after 1960 when the Emergency was lifted. The overwhelmingly huge population of mainland China made it difficult for it to be ignored in international politics. Gradually, there was a shift to support the representation seat of China in favour of Communist China. In 1961, the government announced that it would 'support, in principle, the representation of People's Republic of China in the United Nations' (United Nations General Assembly, 1077th plenary meeting, 13 Dec. 1961:1019). At the same time the government said to support Taiwan in its right to have a seat in the global organization. Hence, as Johan Saravanamuttu put it, Malaysia kept its neutral stance and adopted 'Two-China policy' (Saravanamuttu 2010: 52-53) on this issue by 1971.

After becoming the Prime Minister in 1970, Tun Razak concluded in 1971 that 'the question of Taiwan is a separate issue which will have to be resolved by the parties concerned' (United Nations General Assembly, 1948th plenary meeting, 1 Oct. 1971: 4). With detachment from the issue, the government subsequently gave full recognition to the People's Republic of China as the representation of China in the United Nations. This was in line with Malaysia's proposal for the neutralization of Southeast Asia, with this status to be guaranteed by the three major powers, *viz*. the Unites States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China.

Transitional Period to Neutrality

The year 1967 marked a watershed in Malaysia's posture in terms of shifting from its pro-Western stance to neutrality. The government started to establish diplomatic ties with communist countries that were deemed not to directly affect its security and defence. By initiating, forming and deepening relationships with several communist countries, Malaysia began in earnest to steer a middle course in international politics. Yugoslavia, which was one of the major countries to have established the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), was the first communist country with which Malaysia formed diplomatic relations. When the Yugoslavian trade mission visited Malaysia in May 1967, the ground was set for the establishment of diplomatic relations (*The Straits Times*, 6 May 1967:1). A few months following this event, the two countries decided to establish diplomatic relations. The second communist country to tie with Malaysia was the Soviet Union, which little influenced Malaysia in spite of the largest communist country in the world. Immediately after *Konfrontasi* ended, the first Malaysian trade mission was sent to the Soviet Union in October 1966 (*The Straits Times*, 7 Oct. 1966: 1). The Soviet trade mission arrived in April in the following year and signed a Trade Agreement whereby Malaysia would export rubber and tin directly to the Soviet Union. Though official relations were not yet established at the time, the Tunku said Malaysia would be happy to set up diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, but Moscow should make the first move (*The Straits Times*, 20 Jan. 1967: 5). Finally diplomatic missions at ambassadorial level were established on 22 November 1967 (*The Straits Times*, 24 Dec. 1967: 16). The Malaysian government had also secured diplomatic ties with Romania and Bulgaria from the East European communist bloc by 1970.

Malaysia had no diplomatic relations with communist countries by the mid-sixties because the country had to deal with domestic communist guerrillas at the outset of independence and

threatened by the pro-communist government of Indonesia during the period of *Konfrontasi*, which had links with a major communist country, China. However, the international environment made it possible for Malaysia to establish relations with communist countries when *Konfrontasi* came to an end. In the transitional period between 1966 and 1970 when official relations with communist countries were initiated, Tun Dr. Ismail proposed a plan for a neutralization of Southeast Asia. In his proposal mooted in the *Dewan Rakyat* (Lower House) on 23 January 1968, the entire Southeast Asian region would pursue a policy of neutrality guaranteed by the three powers, *viz*. the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China. Although some researchers see the motives for neutrality as being for its own sake (Soon 1971:28, Ott 1974:18-24, Singh 1992:47-53), the immediate reason for the neutrality of the region was the fact that the British government had announced the withdrawal of its armed forces from Malaysia and Singapore by the end of 1971 (House of Commons Debates, 27 July 1967, vol. 751, cc1102 and 16 January 1968, vol. 756, cc1581). Subsequently, Malaysia discussed with other four countries in the Five-Power Defence Conference between 1968 and 1971 and signed the Five-Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) to replace the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement (AMDA). Should the deal fail to go through, Tun Dr. Ismail proposed that the concept of regional neutrality be vigorously pursued as an alternative.

The key figures of the government reacted favourably to the proposal. The Tunku, the Prime Minister, commented: 'This is something which is worth giving thought to' (Federation of Malaysia, Parliament Debate, 27 Jan. 1968, col. 4307), adding that the government would try to discuss with the countries in and outside the region, including the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia with which it had diplomatic relations by 1968. Moreover, he remarked that 'we might persuade them to agree to peaceful co-existence, agree to non-aggression pacts and at the same time agree to the neutralization of certain zones, in particular, South East Asia' (Federation of Malaysia, Parliament Debate, 27 Jan. 1968, col. 4308). Tun Razak, the then Deputy Prime Minister, also praised the proposal as the possibility to endorse the policy for the long term objectives (Federation of Malaysia, Parliament Debate, 27 Jan. 1968, col. 4333-4334). To achieve the goal of neutralization, Tun Razak tried to persuade the Soviet Union to guarantee the independence and neutrality of the countries in the region when he visited Russia in May 1968, despite the fact that the original proposer just offered the idea of the neutralization of the region in case of no agreement in the Conference. The communist country responded by only agreeing to adhere to the principle of co-existence (*The Straits Times*, 27 May 1968: 1). It is noteworthy that both the Tunku and Tun Razak accepted the idea of neutralization and, interestingly enough, the latter started to work towards the neutralization of the region immediately after the proposal was made.

Although the government did not declare its foreign policy to be neutral, it can be said from the above discussion that it was practically implemented in 1967 or, roughly speaking, after the end of *Konfrontasi*. Asked if Malaysia was pursuing a non-aligned policy, Tun Razak described its foreign policy as 'independent foreign policy' (*The Straits Times*, 27 May 1968: 1) after visiting Russia in 1968. Even after Tun Razak became the second Prime Minister in 1970, the new government did not make any declarations and announcements of its neutrality. With his attendance at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Lusaka, Zambia, in September 1970, Tun Razak proposed the neutralization of Southeast Asia to fellow ASEAN members that finally accepted it in 1971. The actions propelled the Malaysian administration to pursue a 'new foreign policy' because it needed to change its image after the 1969 riot that forced the Tunku to step down as the Prime Minister. However, it was the Tunku who had laid the groundwork for the government's shift to a neutral foreign policy some two years before the Razak administration took office.

Conclusion

When a neutral foreign policy is adopted by an erstwhile Western-leaning country, it is important for policy-makers to establish their stance on communism. In the case of Malaya/Malaysia, the Tunku and other politicians who formulated the nation's foreign policy were instrumental in steering Malaysia towards neutrality. This article posits that their stance was not one of hardliners against the communist ideology, but was one that tended to be more liberal and neutral. While it was not difficult to adopt a neutral foreign policy as an independent nation, it was not politically expedient to do so during that particular period of the nation's history. Hence, the key government officers, who were neither anti-communists nor pro-communists, did not adopt an overt neutral foreign policy when Malaya obtained independence in 1957. It was the militant communists who were resorting to arms and terrorism that were the stumbling block to a declared policy of neutrality. Moreover, the new government's decision to place priority on the domestic economy and to improve social welfare and education meant that defence spending had to take a backseat. Accordingly, Malaya depended on the British forces for security and defence even when the Emergency that was originally put in place to subdue the communist guerrillas was lifted in 1960. It was still not timely for Malaysia to switch to a more neutral stance in foreign policy in the early sixties when President Sukarno of Indonesia, supported by PKI, launched *Konfrontasi* to crush the newly formed nation of Malaysia. Nevertheless, these circumstances acted as a springboard for Malaysia to shift to a more neutral foreign policy once *Konfrontasi* was over. It was, thus, no accident that Malaysia started to establish diplomatic ties with various communist countries at the end of the sixties. The seeds for adopting a neutral foreign policy were sown in the early years of independence and the foundation of the policy was laid towards the end of the Tunku's administration. It was only following these early phases that the country's neutral foreign policy was further developed under the Tun Razak administration, with Malaysia's proposal for the neutralization of Southeast Asia finally accepted by ASEAN.

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