

## STAYING IN SINGAPORE?: NEW ZEALAND'S THIRD LABOUR GOVERNMENT AND THE RETENTION OF MILITARY FORCES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.

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At the beginning of the 1970s, three Western countries – Britain, Australia and New Zealand – had military forces stationed in Singapore under the Five Power Defence Arrangements for the defence of Malaysia and Singapore. Shortly afterwards, Labour party governments were elected in all three countries, and the Australian and British governments, against the wishes of the Singapore government, withdrew their forces from the island nation. Only the New Zealand Labour government of Norman Kirk was prepared to keep its forces in Singapore, despite having pledged at the 1972 election to negotiate a date for withdrawal. This article considers the question of why the New Zealand government pursued a different policy from its allies in regard to troops in Singapore, a policy which was in stark contrast to its attitude towards New Zealand troops in Vietnam and Cambodia, and one which was not supported by a section of the Labour party membership. Since Australia's withdrawal policy has recently been examined for the first time,<sup>1</sup> it seems worthwhile, and timely, to explore the different priorities underlying the New Zealand Labour government's policy towards troops in Singapore.

### **The New Zealand Military Presence**

New Zealand's military presence in the Malaysia-Singapore area had begun in 1949, when the first Labour government had allowed three New Zealand military transport aircraft to assist the British effort against Communist insurgents during the Emergency in Malaya. In 1955, the presence was increased when a National party government sent a Special Air Service unit to Malaya at British request to form part of a Commonwealth Strategic Reserve. Two years later, again at British request, the SAS unit was replaced with a battalion of infantry, which joined Australian and British battalions in a brigade. After the independence of Malaya, New Zealand and Australia had formally associated themselves with Britain's defence agreement with Malaya, the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement, and their infantry battalions had stayed on as an adjunct to the large British presence. Their purpose had been several-fold: to be their countries' contribution to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation in case of Communist aggression in the Treaty

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1 Andrea Benvenuti and David Martin Jones, 'Engaging Southeast Asia? Labor's Regional Mythology and Australia's Military Withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia 1972-1973', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12 no.4, Fall 2010, pp.32-62.

area; to help defend Malaya and Singapore against any external threat, and to contribute to the internal stability of those countries. In 1963, New Zealand had supported the uniting of Malaya and Singapore with Sarawak and British North Borneo to form the Federation of Malaysia, and had associated itself with the new defence agreement between Britain and Malaysia. During the Confrontation crisis between Malaysia and Indonesia, New Zealand troops had joined British, Australian and Malaysian troops in combatting Indonesian infiltrators into Malaysia.

### **New Zealand Labour and military forces in Malaysia**

The New Zealand Labour party, which was in opposition during the 1960s, had supported the stationing of New Zealand troops in Malaya in 1955, mainly out of Commonwealth loyalty to Britain, but also because it recognised a New Zealand interest in the security of the region. In this it differed from its Australian counterpart, which was against the stationing of Australian forces abroad in peacetime, and especially their use to 'bolster up imperialism in Southeast Asia', as the party saw it.<sup>2</sup> The ideology of both Labour parties was anti-militarist and anti-imperialist and in favour of economic solutions to problems of stability, but the New Zealand party also believed that New Zealand had a duty to assist Britain with Commonwealth defence, and that helping to suppress the Communist insurgency in Malaya would advance Malaya's achievement of self-determination.<sup>3</sup> New Zealand Labour, however, opposed New Zealand's military involvement in another South-east Asian country, South Vietnam, which was outside the Commonwealth and which lacked a popularly-elected government. By 1966, the Labour party had committed itself to withdrawing the small New Zealand force in Vietnam.

It was only a year later, in 1967, that both of New Zealand's main political parties were forced to consider the future of the New Zealand forces in Malaysia. This reconsideration was stimulated by the British Labour government's announcement of its intention to withdraw all British military forces from South-east Asia by the mid-1970s. Britain's economic weakness was forcing it to drastically cut its military commitments overseas. Strong forces in the British Labour party had been demanding cuts in military expenditure in order to fulfil the Government's social objectives.<sup>4</sup>

At first, it seemed that the New Zealand Labour party might see the British withdrawal as a chance to switch New Zealand's aid from the military to the economic sphere. Norman Kirk, the party leader, told a student audience in July 1967 that

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- 2 Norman Harper, 'Australia and the United States' in Gordon Greenwood and Norman Harper (eds.) *Australia in World Affairs 1950-55*, Melbourne. 1957, p. 191.
  - 3 D. J. McCraw, 'Objectives and Priorities in New Zealand's Foreign Policy in Asia 1949-75: A Study of the Issue of the Recognition of the People's Republic of China and of Security policies in Southeast Asia', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Otago, 1978, pp. 353-355, citing the Nash Papers Bundles 69 and 132.
  - 4 Toni Schonenberger, 'The British Withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia: Influence of the Labour Party on the Decision', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol.3 no.2, Sept 1981, pp.113-125.

the security and stability of Malaysia and Singapore had come to depend upon the economic improvement of the people there and not on military forces. The phasing out of the British presence meant an opportunity for new policies.<sup>5</sup> It was soon evident, however, that the new policies did not include the withdrawal of New Zealand forces. In January 1968, Kirk said that New Zealand should stay on militarily in Malaysia after the British withdrawal date (which had been advanced that month to 1971), but seek to have the British contribution replaced by Malaysia and Singapore themselves.<sup>6</sup> Diplomatic initiatives should be taken, he said, to maintain an allied ground force of brigade strength at Terendak, the Strategic Reserve's base camp in Malacca. The Labour party leader also looked forward to a new formal security pact with Malaysia and Singapore as part of a new regional defence grouping that he hoped would replace the South East Asia Treaty organisation.<sup>7</sup>

This policy did not command total support in the party at large, as the annual party conference in May 1968 showed. Kirk had to argue hard to prevent the passage of a resolution put up by Michael Bassett opposing any retention of New Zealand forces in the region after the British withdrawal.<sup>8</sup> In his speech, the party leader declared: 'the last thing we ought to do is to adopt this resolution and close off assistance to our neighbours, especially to members of the British Commonwealth.' Kirk asked whether Labour should ignore the wishes of Commonwealth states with whom it traded and with whom it had long held a firm friendship. New Zealand could not replace the British contribution to Malaysia and Singapore, but it should do what it could to help its friends achieve economic stability: 'Regional co-operation should be, and must be, a full and viable partnership'.<sup>9</sup> Bassett said that the danger was that New Zealand could become disastrously involved in a civil war in Malaysia. Labour, he said, should show the Singaporean and Malaysian leaders that New Zealand was not the fire brigade of the world.<sup>10</sup> The conference rejected the resolution by 385 votes to 221. However, it passed a resolution in favour of New Zealand's withdrawal from the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation.

The fact that Kirk's support for a continuing New Zealand military force in Malaysia was based mainly on Commonwealth loyalty came out again in November 1968 when he supported the National government's interim decision on the matter, which was to leave New Zealand troops in Malaysia at least until 1971. Kirk said: 'We believe that, as a Commonwealth country, we have a duty to Malaysia and the adjacent country of Singapore that transcends any commitments we may have in other areas of South-east Asia. For this reason we welcome the decision to maintain a roughly similar contribution to that we have been making over the years in Malaysia, up to the end of 1971'.<sup>11</sup>

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5 Norman Kirk, *Towards Nationhood*, Palmerston North, 1969, p. 54.

6 *Dominion*, 29 January 1968, p. 3.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Otago Daily Times* (ODT), 9 May 1968, p. 5.

9 *New Zealand Herald* (NZH), 9 May 1968, p. 3.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* (NZPD), Vol. 358, p. 3219, 20 November 1968.

In February 1969, the National party government decided to keep New Zealand forces in the area after 1971, in conjunction with the Australia. It believed that New Zealand retained a national interest in the security of Southeast Asia, and that even if New Zealand and Australia could not take over the British role in Malaysia and Singapore, they could still make a useful contribution to regional security through close co-operation with the countries of the area.<sup>12</sup>

The Labour party leader called the National government's decision 'sensible'.<sup>13</sup> Three months later, he said that New Zealand troops should remain in Singapore and Malaysia for as long as those Commonwealth countries desired their presence. New Zealand ought, however, to be working towards a state of affairs in which it would not be necessary to station troops outside the country. Economic advancement, he said, was by far the strongest safeguard of security.<sup>14</sup>

The Australian Labor Party, however, opposed the decision to retain troops in Malaysia after 1971. The party leader, Gough Whitlam, characterised the decision as an exercise in imperial nostalgia, an expression of a garrison mentality instead of an adjustment to the realities of a new Asia. The correct policy was to withdraw Australian forces and redirect Australia's military role to assisting the build-up of indigenous forces through technical assistance, the supply of arms and training.<sup>15</sup>

In the wake of the race riots in Malaysia in May 1969, some New Zealand Labour parliamentarians voiced unease about the continuing presence of New Zealand troops in that country. Defence spokesman Arthur Faulkner, for instance, worried that the presence of Commonwealth troops in Malaysia might be encouraging the Malaysian government to resist measures of reform. He called for a steady reduction in New Zealand's forces and the training of additional Malaysian replacements to look after Malaysia's security.<sup>16</sup> As it happened, the New Zealand government had decided earlier in the year to move its forces from Malaysia to Singapore.<sup>17</sup> The motive, however, was financial rather than political. The Terendak base was too expensive for Australia and New Zealand to maintain without Britain, and cheaper barracks were available in Singapore.

The Labour party's policy manifesto for the 1969 general election did not reflect the views of those in the party with doubts about the continuing New Zealand military presence in Singapore. It declared that the arrangements made with Singapore and Malaysia under the ANZAM military planning agreement and 'extending beyond British military withdrawal' were supported.<sup>18</sup> This policy contrasted with that towards

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12 Keith Holyoake, 'A Defence and Foreign Policy for New Zealand', *New Zealand External Affairs Review*, Vol. 19 No. 3, March 1969, pp. 3-14, esp. p. 10.

13 *Dominion*, 8 March 1969, p. 2.

14 *Waikato Times*, 13 May 1969, p. 3.

15 J. L. Richardson, 'Australian Strategic and Defence Policies' in Gordon Greenwood and Norman Harper (eds.) *Australia in World Affairs 1966-1970*, Melbourne, 1974, p. 246.

16 NZPD, Vol. 360, pp. 538-539, 4 June 1969.

17 *External Affairs Review*, Vol. 19, No.1, January 1969, p. 38.

18 New Zealand Labour party, *Labour's Election Policy 1969*, Wellington, 1969, p. 29.

New Zealand troops in Vietnam. Although the election manifesto was not explicit about the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, Kirk promised during the election campaign that a Labour government would withdraw New Zealand troops from Vietnam as soon as possible.<sup>19</sup> The Labour party, however, did not win the election.

Despite the election manifesto's positive stance on retention on troops in Singapore, senior Labour parliamentarians raised the subject of the duration of New Zealand's military presence in that country as soon as the House of Representatives met in 1970. The party's spokesman on agriculture, Colin Moyle, declared: 'Militarily our forward presence in South-east Asia should be a reluctant one, a temporary situation to be ended as soon as Malaysian and Singaporean capability enables our withdrawal to be carried out without endangering the security or stability of our South-east Asian partners'.<sup>20</sup> Defence spokesman Faulkner spoke in the same vein.

The parliamentary leadership, however, remained unwilling to countenance the suggestion, made by some party members, that the party should initiate negotiations for withdrawal when it became government. A resolution to this effect was put forward at the 1970 party conference, saying that a 'firm date' be negotiated for withdrawal by the next Labour government. The External Affairs and Defence committee, chaired by Faulkner, recommended that the remit be amended to read: 'That a Labour government will not withdraw its troops from Malaysia and Singapore without full consultation with the Governments concerned, but will not keep them there any longer than necessary, and to this end from time to time the position will be renewed and analysed with the Governments concerned'.<sup>21</sup> This formulation, however, did not satisfy two party members, Michael Bassett and Jonathan Hunt, MP, both of whom put up amendments to return the resolution closer to the original version. Hunt's amendment said: 'That the Labour party will negotiate for the withdrawal of all troops from Malaysia and Singapore when it becomes Government,' while Bassett's suggested that 'a mutually acceptable date be negotiated by the next Labour government with the Governments of Singapore and Malaysia for the withdrawal of New Zealand armed forces from these countries'. Both of these amendments were lost after party leader Kirk spoke against them. Kirk said: 'How can you make any new treaty with Malaysia and Singapore if you breach the treaty under which our troops are already there?'<sup>22</sup> One of the party's foreign policy goals, according to the 1969 manifesto, was the establishment of wider regional arrangements in South-east Asia for the preservation of peace. Kirk went on to ask the conference: 'How can we pledge our faith in the Commonwealth and at the same time take the first opportunity to withdraw our support from two Commonwealth countries?'<sup>23</sup>

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19 *Waikato Times*, 3 November 1969, p. 2.

20 NZPD, Vol. 365, p. 549 11 April 1970.

21 New Zealand Labour Party, *Report of the Fifty-fourth Annual Conference*, Wellington, 1970, p. 40.

22 NZH 6 May 1970 p. 3.

23 Ibid.

Kirk's conviction that New Zealand forces should remain in Singapore seemed to be strengthened by a tour he made of South-east Asia in June 1970. In a report of his trip circulated to fellow parliamentary members of the Labour party, Kirk said that there was a strong desire in both Singapore and Malaysia for the retention of the New Zealand contribution to their defence assistance. Although the New Zealand contribution was not large, he wrote, tangible benefits were derived from its presence: 'These forces cannot and will not be used in connection with any domestic trouble and there is no sign of any external situation that would lead to their involvement, but it is not the use that is important. It is the presence. It broadens the relationships between both countries, demonstrates the determination to maintain political stability, and leads to greater confidence and co-operation within the community as well as in inter-country affairs.'<sup>24</sup>

Kirk's trip to Southeast Asia had coincided with a general election in Britain which ousted the British Labour party from office and brought in the Conservatives. The Conservative government reversed the decision to withdraw militarily from South-east Asia. It decided to station a small British force in Singapore indefinitely, and come to a new defence agreement with Malaysia and Singapore that would include Australia and New Zealand as equal partners.

At the time of the British decision in April 1971, the mood of the extra-Parliamentary New Zealand Labour party seemed to be turning against a military commitment to Singapore. The party's annual conference in May passed a resolution that no New Zealand forces should be stationed on foreign soil in a military capacity unless they were part of a United Nations force or unless it was clearly required by treaty.<sup>25</sup> This formulation was apparently acceptable to the party leadership, although it implied support for a withdrawal from Singapore unless the new defence agreement specifically called for a military presence. Kirk appeared to be in tune with the conference's attitude at this time. In June 1971 he made a public speech sceptical of the proposed new Five-Power Defence Agreement between Britain, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia and New Zealand. The party leader advocated less concentration on collective security measures in Asia and more concern with developing new arrangements to promote regional economic development.<sup>26</sup>

The Five-Power Defence Agreement which emerged in November 1971 did not oblige the Australasian and British participants to maintain forces in Singapore. It obliged them only to consult together about measures to be taken if Malaysia and Singapore were threatened with attack.

The Australian Labor Party announced that if it came to power, it would withdraw the Australian battalion from Singapore. Kirk, however, revealed that his attitude to the Singapore force was unchanged from the previous year, despite the resolution of the party conference. Asked by a broadcasting interviewer in November 1971 if the New

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24 *New Zealand Labour Party Journal*, November 1970, p. 53.

25 *New Zealand Labour Party, Report of the Fifty-Fifth Annual Conference*, Wellington, 1971, p. 9.

26 Norman Kirk, *New Zealand and its Neighbours*, Wellington, 1971, p. 9.

Zealand Labour party's policy was the same as that of the Australian Labor party, Kirk said that it was not. The party had stated, he said, that it would maintain New Zealand's contribution as long as the Governments of Singapore and Malaysia desired it, and as long as the presence was of some material benefit in assisting to maintain stability in the region. Stability depended upon a climate of confidence which the troops would promote. Their role was likened to that of a policeman on the beat, giving reassurance. Kirk said that because he regarded that reassurance as important, 'I have no difficulty whatsoever in accepting that a request from two other Commonwealth countries should be met'.<sup>27</sup> Kirk did say, however, that he did not regard the arrangement as permanent or long-lasting. Once again, the Labour leader had indicated that the Commonwealth link was a factor in the party's policy. Reinforcing the Commonwealth bond was Kirk's personal friendship with the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew.<sup>28</sup>

Despite Kirk's statement in support of New Zealand's military presence in Singapore, the following year saw party policy apparently move more definitely towards withdrawal. The process began at the 1972 party conference in May, when the Singapore force issue came up for the third year in a row. A remit proposed that the next Labour government should negotiate with the governments of Singapore and Malaysia for a firm date for the withdrawal of New Zealand's armed forces from those countries. The conference's international and defence committee, chaired by Faulkner, was unhappy with the call for a 'firm' date, but was prepared to go along with the idea of negotiating for withdrawal. The committee recommended that the remit be amended to read: 'That the next Labour government negotiate with the Governments of Malaysia and Singapore for a mutually acceptable date for the withdrawal of New Zealand armed forces from those countries'.<sup>29</sup> This formulation was practically identical to the one suggested by Bassett at the 1970 conference, which had been rejected. While yielding to party feeling about withdrawal, the committee had made it clear that the withdrawal date should be one approved by Malaysia and Singapore. In this form, the remit was passed by the conference.

The National government, meanwhile, had reiterated its commitment to the Singapore presence. The new Defence Minister, Alan McCready, told the Singapore government in March 1972 that New Zealand troops would stay on in Singapore even if the Australians withdrew,<sup>30</sup> while Foreign Minister Keith Holyoake told the New Zealand Parliament in July: 'I stress the importance which we attach to New Zealand's contribution to the five-power defence arrangement for Malaysia and Singapore'.<sup>31</sup>

In Parliament in August, Faulkner and Moyle questioned the National government about when Malaysia and Singapore would achieve self-sufficiency in defence, and if

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27 Labour Party Research Unit, Transcript, 'Point of View' broadcast, 7 November 1971, p. 49.

28 Discussion with Hon. Arthur Faulkner, M.P., 25 June 1980.

29 New Zealand Labour party, *Report of the Fifty-Sixth Annual Conference*, Wellington, 1972, p. 53.

30 ODT 15 March 1972 p. 8.

31 NZPD Vol. 379, p. 1066, 13 July 1972.

a terminating date for the New Zealand presence had been fixed.<sup>32</sup> Holyoake replied that there was no target date for Malaysia and Singapore's achieving defence self-sufficiency, and no preconceived context or situation in which the three outside powers would withdraw.

When the 1972 election manifesto of the Labour party was released in October of that year, it reflected the conference resolution of fixing a date for the withdrawal of the troops from Singapore. It thus nudged the party's policy closer to that of the Australian Labor party. The manifesto declared that the party, if elected, would, in consultation with the treaty countries, establish a reasonable date for the return home of the New Zealand forces from Malaysia and Singapore.<sup>33</sup> On the face of it, the party's policy had changed in the space of a year. Whereas previously Kirk had been content that the troops should stay as long as they were needed, the party had now apparently committed itself to fixing a time limit to New Zealand's military presence. The policy towards the troops in Singapore was now more in harmony with Labour's pledge to withdraw all New Zealand military training teams in Indochina.

### **The Third Labour Government**

At the general election on 25 November 1972, the Labour party was elected with a large majority. Kirk became Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Faulkner the Minister of Defence. It soon became clear that, despite the manifesto, policy towards the troops in Singapore was not about to change. In an interview given on the day he took office, Kirk indicated that the 'reasonable date' for the return home of the New Zealand troops in Singapore was really dependent on the governments of Singapore and Malaysia. Kirk told political correspondent Eric Benton that New Zealand would withdraw its troops 'at a mutually convenient date, and this will revolve around the wishes of the two governments'.<sup>34</sup>

As far as Kirk was concerned, the Labour party's desire for withdrawal would remain subordinate to the wishes of Singapore and Malaysia. This accommodating attitude with regard to the troops in Singapore was at marked variance with the new government's determined attitude towards New Zealand's army training teams in Indochina. One of Government's first foreign policy acts was to announce the withdrawal of the teams. There was no qualification concerning the wishes of the two governments involved: those of Cambodia and South Vietnam. The Minister of Defence said on 11 December that negotiations were in train to establish dates when the training teams could be released from their responsibilities, and that it was hoped to have the servicemen back in New Zealand by Christmas.<sup>35</sup> The Minister said that it was no longer Government policy to provide military assistance to South Vietnam.

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32 NZPD, Vol. 379, pp. 1413-1414, 2 August 1972.

33 New Zealand Labour Party, *1972 Election Manifesto*, Wellington, 1972, p. 29.

34 *Wairarapa Times-Age*, 27 December 1972, p. 13.

35 *New Zealand Foreign Affairs Review* (NZFAR), Vol. 22 No. 12, December 1972, p. 35.



The Labour government's Singapore policy faced its first challenge within days of the Government's taking office. On 2 December, the Labor party came to power in Australia and it was determined to remove both the Australian battalion and its artillery battery from Singapore. On 22 December, in a statement broadcast over Radio Australia, Prime Minister Whitlam confirmed his government's intention to reduce the Australian military contribution to the Five Power Defence Arrangements. 'The idea of keeping a permanent garrison in Singapore', he declared, 'belongs to the past'.<sup>36</sup>

Although the New Zealand government was eager that New Zealand should have a more self-reliant and independent foreign policy,<sup>37</sup> the Australian move affected New Zealand's position in Singapore. The availability of logistical support for the New Zealand force was a factor in its continuing presence, and logistical support for the ANZUK brigade was supplied by the Australians. With this about to be withdrawn, the New Zealand government had three options open to it concerning its military presence. It could withdraw the contingent; it could try to persuade the Australian government to change its mind and retain at least the support element of the ground force in Singapore, or it could arrange to provide its own supporting forces. It seems that Kirk chose the second option: to try to persuade the Australian government to keep at least the logistics personnel in Singapore.

One of Kirk's early moves as Prime Minister was to invite the new Australian Prime Minister to confer with him, and Whitlam duly visited New Zealand late in January 1973. The communique issued at the end of the visit conspicuously avoided a statement about the future of the Australian and New Zealand forces in Singapore, noting only that the future disposition of the forces had been discussed and that each government would consult with the other partners in the Five Power Defence Arrangements.<sup>38</sup> The two Prime Ministers did, however, acknowledge the importance of maintaining stability and confidence in the area while the countries there were adjusting to the end of the Vietnam war and the change in Great Power relationships.

Whitlam's visit to New Zealand was followed very closely by one from the British Defence Secretary, Lord Carrington. He had come to persuade the Labour government to retain New Zealand's contingent in Singapore, but found that persuasion was unnecessary. After two days of discussion with Kirk, Carrington said that Britain intended to continue its current contribution to the Five-Power Defence Arrangement and 'I am delighted to hear that the New Zealand government intends to do so, too'.<sup>39</sup>

Kirk had, in fact, informed the British High Commissioner early in January that New Zealand would 'stay on' in Singapore, unless Whitlam 'rubbished the whole show'. Certainly, New Zealand would stay on if the Australians reduced their contingent

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36 Benvenuti and Jones, 'Engaging Southeast Asia? Labor's Regional Mythology and Australia's Military Withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia, 1972-1973', p. 48.

37 'New Zealand in the World of the 1970s', NZFAR, Vol. 22 No. 12, December 1972, p. 12.

38 NZFAR, Vol. 23 No. 1, January 1973, pp. 7-8.

39 *The Times*, London, 1 February 1973, p. 6.

without withdrawing altogether. Kirk told the High Commissioner that he 'was keen to see the present Five Power arrangements continue' as they constituted the best means of 'keeping Britain in Asia'. Indeed, Kirk thought he would 'sleep better at night' if he knew the British were still there.<sup>40</sup>

Carrington went on to Australia, where he failed to get the Australian government to change its mind on withdrawal. Both Whitlam and Defence Minister Barnard stressed that the withdrawal of Australian forces from Singapore in early 1974 was 'not open to negotiation.' They did, however, reassure Carrington that they would maintain Australia's naval and air contributions to the Five Power Defence Arrangements, and would leave sufficient personnel in the logistics support group to make it unlikely that extra manpower would be required.<sup>41</sup> Whitlam and Barnard had their own reasons for retaining the logistical support troops. Among those troops was a secret Signals Intelligence Unit, for which no alternative site was yet available.<sup>42</sup>

In the wake of Carrington's visit, the Australian Prime Minister announced that Australia's 600-man support group would stay in Singapore after the infantry battalion departed in January 1974.<sup>43</sup> This, however, caused 'serious reverberations' in the Australian Labor Party. The council of the Victorian branch roundly condemned the Government's plans.<sup>44</sup> The Victorian branch was the centre of the strong left-wing of the party, which not only opposed any Australian forces being stationed abroad, but also worked for a neutralist or non-aligned foreign policy.<sup>45</sup> Pressure from this source caused Whitlam and Barnard to almost immediately start reconsidering their concession.

A formal announcement that New Zealand would maintain its forces in Singapore at current levels was made by the Minister of Defence in February: 'We have now had the time and opportunity to consider the views of our partners on the future of our forces in Singapore. We have agreed that the Governments of Malaysia and Singapore welcome their presence and appreciate the assistance they can continue to give during this transitional period in which these two countries are building up and strengthening their own armed forces'.<sup>46</sup> Faulkner made no mention of any intention to settle on a withdrawal date. He welcomed the Australian government's decision to leave some forces in Singapore because it made it easier for New Zealand to maintain its own forces there. Faulkner's use of the word 'easier' suggested that even if the Australian decision had been different, New Zealand would have continued to keep its troops in Singapore. The Minister's only concession to the future was to say that the presence of

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40 Benvenuti and Jones, p.49, quoting Wellington to FCO Telegram 11, 5 January 1973, in FCO 24/1553, UK National Archives.

41 Benvenuti and Jones, p. 50.

42 Sir Arthur Tange (ed. Peter Edwards), *Defence Policy-Making: A Close-up View 1950-1980*, Canberra, 2008, p. 70.

43 J. A. Camilleri, *An Introduction to Australian Foreign Policy*, Milton, Queensland, 1975, p. 96.

44 Henry A. Albinski, *Australian External Policy under Labor*, p. 242.

45 Alan Reid, *The Whitlam Venture*, Melbourne, 1976, p. 73.

46 *New Zealand Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 23 No. 2, February 1973, p. 31.

New Zealand forces in the region would be reviewed from time to time in the light of local needs and the developing regional situation.

The New Zealand military presence in Singapore assumed even greater importance in the Labour government's eyes after the Minister of Defence visited South-east Asia for discussions in March 1973. One of the Government's major objectives was to promote new regional associations which would help unite the people of Asia and strengthen their governments. Faulkner's consultations revealed, however, that the South-east Asian countries were not yet ready for these wider arrangements. The New Zealand government therefore decided to concentrate in the meantime on strengthening New Zealand's relations with individual countries in Asia 'in a way which we hope will strengthen their confidence in the values of regional cooperation'.<sup>47</sup>

The Singapore force became a necessary instrument of this strategy. Kirk explained the new importance of the force in a June 1973 speech. New Zealand's interest, he said, was in preventing further conflicts in Southeast Asia that drew in other powers. Differences between Southeast Asian nations could be resolved by closer association and working together. However, since the nations of Southeast Asia were suspicious of each other, and especially of China, the only way that regional co-operation between them was going to come about was if they had confidence in the support of friends. Faulkner's discussions had confirmed that all the countries were interested in increasing co-operation with New Zealand, 'not only in the fields of economic development, investment and trade, but also in that of defence'.<sup>48</sup> Kirk said that New Zealand's armed forces still had an important part to play in the area in furtherance of the long-range goal. Security was a major preoccupation of all the governments of the area and defence co-operation was therefore of particular importance to them: 'They see our willingness to maintain forces in the area as evidence that we understand their problems, that we are serious in our desire to help them, and that we are willing to pay a price in terms of public criticism – that we are prepared to stand up and be counted'.<sup>49</sup>

In Australia, however, the Labor government had changed its mind about leaving some forces in Singapore, as a result of pressure from the party's left-wing. As early as March, Barnard had proposed to the Cabinet's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee that the logistics personnel be gradually reduced and the two air force squadrons at Butterworth in Malaysia be brought home in 1976. The Committee agreed in principle to Barnard's recommendations, and asked him to consult Australia's allies about them.<sup>50</sup>

The Malaysian, Singaporean, British and New Zealand reaction was very negative. When Whitlam travelled to London in April 1973, Carrington warned him that unless Australia retained its logistics support group in Singapore, Britain 'might

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47 *Report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the year ended 31 March 1973*, Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives (AJHR) A-1, 1973 p. 9.

48 'Prime Minister's Address to the Returned Services Association', *New Zealand Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 23 No. 6. June 1973, p. 22.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

50 Benvenuti and Jones, pp. 51-53.

find it impossible' to remain in Southeast Asia. When the British Foreign Minister asked Whitlam why he attached such limited importance to the Five Power Defence Arrangements, the Australian Prime Minister replied that Australia was now giving higher priority to its relations with Indonesia than to those with Malaysia and Singapore.<sup>51</sup>

Kirk tried to persuade Barnard of the need for an Australian contribution, however small. New Zealand, however, was reluctant to condemn the Australian government's policy in case it damaged the country's bilateral ties with Australia. The Kirk government confined itself to warning Australia that its plan would damage Australia's relations with Southeast Asian countries.<sup>52</sup>

In July 1973, the Australian Cabinet endorsed the decision of its Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee and announced that all its troops would be withdrawn by April 1975 with the exception of 150 men, who would not be assigned to the ANZUK force. The fate of the air units would be decided in March 1975.<sup>53</sup>

The New Zealand government did not take the chance to negotiate an exit for its own troops. The Prime Minister said that there was no question of New Zealand forces being withdrawn in the near future. The Malaysian and Singaporean governments had made it clear that they welcomed the continued New Zealand presence as an instrument to foster stability during a difficult transitional period, and that for its part, the Government had indicated that it intended to keep its forces in the area as long as they were wanted by the governments concerned. New Zealand was studying the modifications that would need to be made to logistics arrangements in the light of the Australian programme.<sup>54</sup>

The desire to strengthen ties with Singapore was not, however, the sole determinant of Labour's policy. Kirk was also mindful of the views of New Zealand's other friends and allies. In August 1973, the Prime Minister said that there was evidence from 'other countries' that they would be interested in New Zealand's remaining in the ANZUK grouping because of its stabilising effect.<sup>55</sup> The other countries probably included such Southeast Asian nations as Thailand and Indonesia, as well as the United States and Britain. The Conservative government in Britain was anxious that New Zealand troops should stay, and Kirk wanted in turn to encourage a continuing British presence. He said that the ANZUK grouping was the last British presence in the region, and that at a time when changes of unpredictable magnitude were taking place in the area, there was 'a lot to be said for keeping things on an even keel'.<sup>56</sup> Whitlam and Barnard, in contrast, were inclined to question the view that the retention of British military forces in Southeast Asia was an Australian national interest.<sup>57</sup>

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51 Ibid., p. 54.

52 Ibid., p. 55.

53 Ibid., p. 56.

54 *New Zealand Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 23 No. 7, July 1973, p. 17.

55 *Waikato Times*, 17 August 1973, p. 3.

56 Ibid.

57 Andrea Benvenuti and Moreen Dee, 'The Five Power Defence Arrangements and the reappraisal of the British and Australian policy interests in Southeast Asia 1970-75', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 41 No. 1, 2010, p. 121.

The withdrawal of the Australians led to the end of the ANZUK brigade, and while visiting Southeast Asia at the end of 1973, Kirk announced the setting up of an independent New Zealand command. He renewed his assurance that the troops would stay as long as they were wanted.<sup>58</sup> In Indonesia, the New Zealand Prime Minister said that the Labour government no longer saw New Zealand's presence as the relic of a past era of military diplomacy, but as a pledge of New Zealand's involvement in working out the new shape of the region, and of its desire to reliably stand by its friends in a time of rapid change.<sup>59</sup>

The Kirk government's continuation of New Zealand's military presence in Singapore left it open to Opposition charges of changing its election policy. At the opening of the 1974 parliamentary session in March, a National party member declared that the consultation between New Zealand and Singapore referred to in Labour's election manifesto was supposed to be about a returning date, not about whether or not the troops would return. Kirk replied that the date of return was not a defined calendar date, but the date that both governments agreed that stability had been achieved.<sup>60</sup>

The Labour government was also subject to attack from its own party members for the apparent retreat from the 1972 Singapore policy. At the Labour party conference in May 1974, a 'strong group'<sup>61</sup> of delegates called for the withdrawal of New Zealand's forces to begin before 1975, and for a firm date for the completion of the withdrawal to be announced before the next election.<sup>62</sup> One delegate declared that reactionary governments in Singapore and Malaysia were suppressing freedom and a free press and throwing trade unionists into gaol.<sup>63</sup> The Minister of Defence, however, urged the conference not to pass a remit which could help destroy the bi-lateral relationships which had been set up with those countries. He said that the New Zealand government would pass on to the governments concerned 'criticism of their attitudes which we find unacceptable'.<sup>64</sup> The resolution was lost on a hands vote, and in its place a remit reaffirming the 1972 manifesto policy was passed.

The Kirk government was not only determined to keep New Zealand troops in Singapore, but anxious that Britain should keep its forces there as well. Early in 1974, Britain's continuing presence came into question when the Heath government was defeated in an election and the British Labour party returned to power. Britain was in economic crisis at this time because of the effects of the first oil shock. The new government immediately began a review of defence expenditure with a view to substantial cuts. When the British Minister of State for Defence, William Rodgers, arrived in Wellington in May 1974 to seek New Zealand's views on the proposed cuts,

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58 *New Zealand Foreign Affairs Review* (NZFAR), Vol. 23 No.12 (1973), p. 28.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

60 NZPD, Vol. 389, p. 827, 13 March 1974.

61 *Waikato Times*, 17 May 1974, p. 5.

62 New Zealand Labour Party, *Report of the Fifty-Eighth Annual Conference*, Wellington, 1974, p. 71.

63 *Waikato Times*, 17 May 1974, p. 5.

64 *Ibid.*

the Kirk government urged Britain not to follow Australia out of Singapore.<sup>65</sup> Faulkner told Rodgers that the New Zealand government did not regard the New Zealand presence in Singapore as an open-ended commitment, but believed that New Zealand forces needed to stay in Southeast Asia a little longer.

Nevertheless, at the end of 1974, the British government decided that Britain could no longer spread its forces around the world and that it must concentrate on Europe. Prime Minister Harold Wilson told Gough Whitlam that the Labour government had been 'forced to the conclusion that our 1968 decision to withdraw our forces from South East Asia must now be carried out'.<sup>66</sup>

The New Zealand government had another opportunity to follow its allies, but the reaction was the same as it had been to the Australian withdrawal announcement in 1973. New Zealand Labour's policy had not changed, although three months previously Prime Minister Kirk had died and there had been a restructuring of the Labour government. The new Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs was Wallace (Bill) Rowling, who had been Minister of Finance. Faulkner had moved to the Ministry of Labour, and had been replaced as Defence Minister by Bill Fraser. The new Prime Minister responded to the British decision by saying that while New Zealand's force would not stay in Singapore indefinitely, they would remain 'as long as it was in the mutual interests of both this country and Singapore and Malaysia'.<sup>67</sup> He was pleased that Britain had reaffirmed its intention of upholding the consultative provisions of the Five Power Defence Arrangements.

New Zealand's policy, however, began to alter course just a few months later when Singapore's Prime Minister paid a visit to New Zealand. He came at a moment of crisis in Southeast Asia – South Vietnam was disintegrating under an invasion by the North Vietnamese. In discussions with the New Zealand cabinet in April 1975, Lee Kuan Yew said that the value of Five Power Defence Arrangements was mainly psychological in nature, and this aspect was even more important at this time. Even if they were rather tenuous, they could be retained as a concept since they had a pacifying effect in the area. New Zealand forces were always welcome to stay in Singapore. He did not think they would ever be involved in a conflict, internally or otherwise. However, if New Zealand wished to withdraw its forces, this would not worry Singapore. He would like to see units of the Singaporean National Service force come to New Zealand for periods of training.<sup>68</sup> Lee had in mind a force of battalion size coming to New Zealand for 3 or four months, but this would not be an alternative to having the New Zealand force in Singapore.

The Minister of Overseas Trade commented that because the possibility of Communist insurgency in Singapore was remote, and because the New Zealand forces

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<sup>65</sup> *Waikato Times*, 21 May 1974, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: the authorized life of Lord Wilson of Rievaulx*, London 1993, pp. 459-460.

<sup>67</sup> *Otago Daily Times*, 5 December 1974, p. 7.

<sup>68</sup> 'Visit of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore, 7 April 1975, CAB 500/23/1 Archives New Zealand AAFD W4198 811/96.

in Singapore would never be deployed in the event of any civil disturbance and there was little or no prospect of a clash with neighbouring countries, he wondered whether the continued presence of the New Zealand force could be justified with any honesty. Mr Lee replied that the nature of the force and its composition were well understood in Singapore.<sup>69</sup>

Publicly, Lee Kuan Yew repeated that New Zealand troops were welcome to stay in Singapore, but they were also free to leave whenever they wished. The position in the region was now different from that of 1971.<sup>70</sup>

It seems likely that with the withdrawal of the British forces, the point of a New Zealand presence had gone for the Singaporeans.<sup>71</sup> New Zealand's presence had been useful to keep the British in the region, but served little purpose by itself. Later in the year, the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Asian division said that it had been made clear to New Zealand that Singapore now preferred to send its troops to New Zealand for training rather than have a New Zealand unit stationed in Singapore for this purpose. There was the possibility that the presence of New Zealand forces could be misinterpreted by some others. The political currents in the region were strongly against anything resembling a foreign military base.<sup>72</sup>

The Labour government now began to consider withdrawal of the Singapore force for the first time. The Defence Minister visited Southeast Asia and discussed the question of the return of the force with his counterparts there.<sup>73</sup> On 6 May, he announced that his Ministry had begun a planning exercise to determine the amount of time needed to complete a withdrawal. On the same day, the Deputy Prime Minister, Bob Tizard, announced that the Government was to arrange the withdrawal of part of its armed forces from Singapore.<sup>74</sup> It was not made clear, however, that the men being withdrawn were only those whose functions had ended with the withdrawal of the British contingent, and some days later the Prime Minister denied that the Government had decided on a withdrawal of the main body. Rowling said that it would take about two years to bring the unit home from the time that the decision on withdrawal was taken and this was a decision that the Cabinet had yet to make.<sup>75</sup> The Prime Minister admitted later that month that one problem with withdrawal was the inability of the Government to provide suitable accommodation for the returning battalion.<sup>76</sup>

A decision to withdraw the New Zealand force from Singapore was announced finally in August 1975, but the announcement still shied away from a definite date for

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69 Ibid.

70 *New Zealand Herald*, 8 April 1975, p. 5.

71 NZPD, Vol. 400, p. 3823, 21 August 1975.

72 Brian Lynch, 'Asian Security – a New Zealand Viewpoint', NZFAR Vol. 25 No. 11, 1975, p. 23.

73 NZFAR, Vol. 25 No. 5 May 1975, p. 81.

74 *New Zealand Herald*, 6 May 1975, p. 1.

75 *New Zealand Herald*, 12 May 1975, p. 2.

76 W. E. Rowling, *New Zealand in an Interdependent World*, Wellington, 1975, pp. 14-15.

the return: 'The government has decided in principle that the New Zealand force should return home to New Zealand in the next two years or so'.<sup>77</sup>

The third Labour government did not get the chance to implement the withdrawal policy. Despite its huge majority, it was crushingly defeated at the general election in November 1975. The incoming National party government reversed the troop withdrawal policy, mainly because of the cost of building accommodation for the troops at home, but it was also justified in terms of supporting and assisting Malaysia and Singapore in the development of their own armed forces.<sup>78</sup> Although the National government's 1978 Defence White paper described the New Zealand military presence in Singapore as 'anachronistic', Singapore itself became more enthusiastic about retaining the troops after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia.<sup>79</sup> It was not until another Labour government came to power in New Zealand in 1984 that the question of withdrawal came up again. The 1987 Defence White paper announced that the New Zealand force would be withdrawn by the end of 1989 because the Government had decided to concentrate its defence forces at home for operations in the South Pacific region: 'To maintain such a significant portion of our armed forces in Singapore would be contrary to the overall thrust of our defence policy'.<sup>80</sup> This time, the intention was carried out.

The long-standing military presence, however, had laid the basis for not only a close defence relationship which continues to this day, but also for a broader relationship which has made Singapore New Zealand's closest friend in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In terms of overall activity, Singapore is New Zealand's largest defence partner in the Asia-Pacific after Australia.<sup>81</sup> The two armed forces exercise and train together regularly. Singapore has also been a key 'window' for New Zealand into ASEAN processes and planning, beginning in 1974, when New Zealand and Australia became ASEAN's first dialogue partners, with Singapore acting as New Zealand's liaison country. The economic relationship has become steadily stronger, with Singapore currently New Zealand's seventh largest bilateral trading partner. A free trade agreement, the New Zealand Singapore Closer Economic Partnership Agreement came into force in 2001. This in turn has formed the basis for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a free trade agreement between New Zealand, Singapore, Brunei and Chile that is looking to expand to take in Australia, the United States and Vietnam.

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77 *Evening Post*, 26 August 1975, p. 1.

78 NZFAR, Vol. 26 No.5, July-September 1976, pp. 27-28.

79 Gerald Hensley, 'Palm and Pine: New Zealand and Singapore' in Anthony L. Smith (ed) *Southeast Asia and New Zealand: a History of Regional and Bilateral Relations*, Singapore and Wellington, 2005, p. 322.

80 *Defence of New Zealand: Review of Defence Policy 1987*, Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives, G.4A 1987, p. 22.

81 'The Republic of Singapore', [www.mfat.govt.nz/countries/asia-south-and-southeast/Singapore.php](http://www.mfat.govt.nz/countries/asia-south-and-southeast/Singapore.php).



## **Conclusion**

The Kirk Labour government's policy towards New Zealand's military forces in Singapore, explored in this article for the first time, provides the best example of the commitment that New Zealand governments felt to the Commonwealth states of Southeast Asia during the Cold War period. This commitment, in turn, has been the foundation for New Zealand's current close relationship with Singapore. The Kirk government retained New Zealand troops in Singapore at the behest of the Singapore government, even though the Labour party was ideologically uncomfortable with the stationing of military forces abroad, and Kirk's fellow Labour governments in Australia and Britain were determined to withdraw their country's forces. The Australian Labor government was more interested in relations with Indonesia than with Malaysia and Singapore, and the British Labour government was more concerned with domestic priorities and with Europe than with Singapore and Malaysia.

Like the Australian Labor party, the New Zealand party was not ideologically at ease with the use of foreign military forces to promote stability in Southeast Asia, and much preferred an economic approach to problems of stability in the region. This attitude dominated the party's policy towards the use of New Zealand forces in South Vietnam. Unlike the Australian Labor party, however, the New Zealand party felt a duty to aid New Zealand's fellow Commonwealth democracies of Malaysia and Singapore in the way that they found most useful. Reinforcing this imperative was Kirk's objective of strengthening New Zealand's relationships with those countries in the interests of regional co-operation. While Labour was in opposition, support for the presence prevailed in party policy, but in the face of a growing tendency to seek a time limit to it. This tendency was strong enough in 1972 for the party to pledge itself to negotiating the withdrawal of New Zealand forces.

Once the party was in office, it became clear that the pledge to establish a date for withdrawal had been a tactical concession to the strong feelings of some party members. Post-election policy was consistent with the line that Kirk had espoused since 1968. The goal of strengthening ties with Singapore and Malaysia was accorded much higher priority than the party's own ideological preferences. This was the exact opposite of the situation in Australia, where the party's left-wing had greater influence. While Singapore and Malaysia continued to require New Zealand forces, the Labour government was determined to accommodate them. Even when New Zealand's other allies withdrew their military forces from Singapore, the New Zealand government refused to follow suit. It was not until the government of Singapore lost interest in the New Zealand presence that the Labour government began to carry out its election policy.

## **Biographical Note**

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