



The Singapore
Bicentennial
Conference

30 September to 1 October 2019

‘CONTESTATIONS & CHOICES’

THE SINGAPORE BICENTENNIAL CONFERENCE

Professor Tan Tai Yong

Yale-NUS College

DECOLONIZATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

- **International** – Cold War
- **Regional** – Nationalist movements, anti-colonialism, Non-alignment
- **Domestic** – social, economic and political challenges, anti-colonialism + the quest for political changes and self-determination

British Colonies in Southeast Asia in 1946 (shaded portions)



BRITISH CALCULATIONS

- When and How to de-colonize?
- The Grand Design – regional grouping of former colonies in SEA
- Plans for Singapore – security concerns; continued use of naval base
- Transfer power to whom?
- End of empire playbook – support reliable local ally; maintain levers of power.

FROM GRAND DESIGN TO MALAYSIA

- British – Merger will undermine left-wing forces and secure naval base in Singapore; solve the problems of the politically under-developed Borneo Territories
- Tunku –to prevent a “Cuba in the backyard”
- Lee Kuan Yew – economic and political reasons for merger

THE SITUATION IN SINGAPORE

Political contest between:

- LKY and PAP – Merger to achieve self-government, Singapore's economic survival and PAP's political survival
- Left-wing – full merger or nothing, fear of anti-communist, conservative Alliance government, advocated full independence so that internal security in local hands
- Different visions for the future of Singapore; different political strategies

Malaysia 1963 (shaded portions)



SEPARATION

- Intractable differences between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur
- Ideological differences: special rights for Malays vs Malaysian Malaysia
- Political differences
- Negotiated separation

HOW HAS THIS HISTORY SHAPED OUR CURRENT POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT?

- Albert Winsemius' advice
- The significance of the Malaysian experience - meritocracy & multiculturalism vs communalism
- How to survive without a natural hinterland – search for new hinterlands; idea of global city-state.