



ACSC Quick-Look

Catalyst for Air & Space Power Research Dialogue



Malaya: A Successful Counterinsurgency Operation

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Discussion. Fundamentally the insurgency in Malaya was an ideological Communist insurrection modeled initially on Russian strategies and later on the Maoist model. There are similarities between the Malayan Communist true believers and the Islamists currently operating in Iraq. Both trust that they have the perfect *Weltanschauung* by which to interpret the foundations and events of history, prioritize resources, and order society. In both situations, it is a battle for ideals. There is a historical context that is slightly different too. As in Iraq, the Malaya Emergency followed a time of great persecution, dictatorship, and a recent war. Like Iraq, Malaya was once a prosperous British colony. It fell to the Japanese in WW II and then, like Iraq, was crippled under tremendous oppression and state-sponsored terror for many years. The Japanese occupation of Malaya saw tremendous degradation and damage to the infrastructure, the economy, and Western credibility much like in Iraq. Malaya was a country with a single valuable and dominant resource—rubber. The parallels to Iraqi oil are striking. Malayan rubber was a strategic commodity that represented the lynch-pin of the national economy. Unlike Iraq, however, the Malayan insurgency emerged initially as an anti-Japanese movement. The Allies backed the insurgents during the war in the fight against an “outside aggressor.” Later, the military arm of the MCP the Malayan Race Liberation Army (MRLA) co-opted the original movement and secured significant caches of arms from the war as a logistical foundation for the post-war domestic political insurrection.

One needs to recognize first of all that the strategies employed were *coalition* strategies. Many think of the Malaya Emergency as a British response; however, it was fundamentally a coalition response. Many nations participated including Australia, New Zealand, and Borneo. Additionally, aboriginal peoples participated along with Gurkhas and a new national police. As in Iraq, the British had to combat the perception that they were just there for their colonial interests in rubber production. Insurgent attacks concentrated on infrastructure, coalition civilians, Malayan government officials, British functionaries, and third-party contract workers. British forces were stretched to their limits as they attempted to counter the insurgent attacks. To adapt their capabilities to the operational situation, the British frequently relied on Special Forces (SAS) to perform counter-insurgency missions.

In addition to purely military responses to the insurgent attacks, the British-led coalition established a national police, army, and air forces. Ground units pushed the MRLA into the jungles, police controlled the population, and paramilitary protected the infrastructure. Admittedly, many of the responses by coalition forces are simply untenable in today’s world. Coalition forces could hold people for two years without trial, impose the death penalty for possession of an illegal weapon and for assisting guerrillas. The coalition also issued identification cards for anyone over twelve years of age. These cards facilitated population control by coalition and national police forces.

Part of the coalition strategy was to get a national police force to secure their nation. However, developing a significant police force to controlling and protecting the population took considerable time. By 1949, the MRLA decentralized their operations, creating compartmentalized cells to avoid detection and attacks. If large coalition forces moved into the area, they quieted down. This gave the illusion that the counterinsurgency was working, when in actuality indoctrination efforts and support for the insurgents was growing. At the time, there was much debate about coalition effectiveness. In the early years, the coalition did little to go after key links and facilitators between the population and the insurgents. Because the coalition ignored these vital components, the insurgents were able to recruit, supply, fund and motivate support for their movement. Left unchecked, the movement developed an extensive shadow government.

In 1950 an “outside-in” strategy developed by Lt General Briggs turned the war in the favor of the coalition. Briggs realized the insurgency had three components: insurgents, links to population, and the people themselves. Counter-insurgency scholars credit four principles of the Briggs plan for effectively defeating the insurgency: (1) separation of the insurgents from the population, (2) unity of effort, (3) quality intelligence, (4) and small unit operations (Bottiglieri, 2000). To separate the insurgents from the population Briggs created resettlement camps to make local populations responsible for their own protection and defense. The resettlement camps drove an operational wedge between the jungle-based

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insurgents and the population upon which they depended for food and recruits. By securing the villages and establishing population control with IDs and checkpoints, Briggs forced confrontations the insurgents to fight coalition forces at the seams between the jungle and the villages. This meant that the coalition no longer pursued the insurgents. They simply waited for them to show up. By 1951, violence and attacks against government supporters and mass terror against the general population increased as conditions for the insurgents deteriorated. As animosity against terror tactics grew, the insurgents shifted to assassination attempts against “enemies of the people.”

The British used national peoples, profiles, and pattern analysis, to map and track the MCP. With increased security, the British established “White Areas” that were assessed to be free of insurrectionist activities and secured by local populations. In response, these sectors received greater rations, more food, and fewer restrictions. As more and more areas were declared “white,” fewer people supported the MRLA. These policies and strategies took an additional six years before the emergency restrictions were lifted. In 1947, Chin Peng took over the MRLA and pursued a Maoist strategy. His plan was to liberate areas along the jungle fringes, establish ‘free’ zones, and finally overwhelm the state with a people’s army. This was a strategy of systematic takeover by infiltrating villages and rural centers. As such, the MRLA killed thousands more civilians (11,000) than the Japanese and British combined. Over time, the civilian population came to hate the MRLA for the death, destruction and pain they caused more than the “colonial occupiers.” It would be 12 years before the government unilaterally declared the war over. It would be 41 years before the Communists officially stopped their insurrection and laid down their arms.

Implications for Current Operations. In Malaya, the British waged direct action operations against company size and smaller Communist fielded forces based in jungle camps. Malayan geography of greatly abetted the British strategy. The jungle afforded tremendous cover for small insurgent forces, but created tremendous logistical problems for them. Surrounded by either water or unsympathetic nations, they had to live off the land—a difficult prospect in the jungle. Like in Iraq however, they had tremendous national appeal as “freedom fighters” due to diminished Western credibility. Although tactically useful, the jungle bases denied the insurrectionists political sanctuary. Initially, they controlled areas of the country which they could force into providing them resources. But as the coalition noose forced them into the jungle, they had great difficulty even feeding themselves. The insurrectionists received virtually no assistance or sponsorship from Russia or China. This contrasts sharply with the current situation in Iraq where there is constant interference and support from groups outside Iraq.

Both insurrections rely on terror to spread fear, confusion and destruction among civilian populations outside of their control. The Malayan insurgents slashed rubber trees and destroyed production facilities to weaken the economic output available to the government. In the final analysis however, the key issue in both Malaya and Iraq centered on sovereignty and disenfranchisement. The MCP wanted a sovereign Communist state. Most Chinese wanted a greater representation in the government. With stability as a precursor, by offering emancipation to the state and franchise to the population, much of the support for the MCP was undermined. Nonetheless, secret support could still be found in trade unions, women’s organizations, and student organizations. In Iraq, even if the general population does not endorse the insurgency, it is still vital to ferret out the elites in various organizations and identify them with those that kill other Iraqis.

The part that doesn’t fit as well in Iraq today is the fact that the MRLA was ethnically and culturally distinct from the general population. Under Japanese occupation, the ethnic Chinese minority suffered greatly. The flood of refugees that poured into the hinterlands of Malaya was mostly Chinese. Unlike in Iraq, the refugees were a difficult problem for the British, and the camps became a breeding ground for discontent and insurgency. These ethnic Chinese formed the mass of the MRLA. However, like Ike is different from Mike, the Chinese are visibly different from the general Malayan population. Additionally, most Chinese were Buddhist, whereas most Malaysians were Muslim. In Iraq, there is little physical difference between Iraqis and surrounding Semitic peoples who could be insurgents. Racial, cultural, and linguistic differences however may in fact exist in the Iraqi insurgents that are difficult for Westerners to discern. Capital might be gained by identifying and highlighting these “foreign” fighters as aggressors and spoilers of the peace. Although the death penalty for having an AK-47 might be impossible in Iraq, a national ID program could help monitor and control the population until civil society developments take a firmer hold. If the general Iraqi population turns against the insurgents, one should expect increased assassination attempts on high officials. If scarce resources need to be prioritized, allocate them to safe, secure and compliant areas.

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