

**STRATEGIC EFFECTS OF THE CONFLICT
WITH IRAQ: SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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FOREWORD

War with Iraq signals the beginning of a new era in American national security policy and alters strategic balances and relationships around the world. The specific effects of the war, though, will vary from region to region. In some, America's position will be strengthened. In others, it may degrade without serious and sustained efforts.

To assess this dynamic, the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) has developed a special series of monographs entitled *Strategic Effects of the Conflict with Iraq*. In each, the author has been asked to analyze four issues: the position that key states in their region are taking on U.S. military action against Iraq; the role of America in the region after the war with Iraq; the nature of security partnerships in the region after the war with Iraq; and the effect that war with Iraq will have on the war on terrorism in the region.

This monograph is one of the special series. SSI is pleased to offer it to assist the Department of Army and Department of Defense in crafting the most effective strategy possible for dealing with the many consequences of war with Iraq.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

ANTHONY L. SMITH is a Senior Research Fellow in the Research Division of the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies. He focuses on domestic and regional issues in Southeast Asia, with special reference to ASEAN, Indonesia's foreign policy and political developments, conflict in Aceh, and East Timor. Previously Dr. Smith was a lecturer in International Relations, Faculty of International Studies, International Pacific College, Palmerston North, New Zealand. He was also seconded to the New Zealand Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in 1998. He was an official observer during the Popular Consultation in East Timor in August 1999. From 2000-2002 he was a Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, and remains an Associate Fellow. Dr. Smith's journal articles include publications in *Asian Journal of Political Science*, *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *Panorama*, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, *New Zealand Journal of History*, and *ASEAN Economic Bulletin*. He is an Associate Editor of the following publications: *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, and the *Berkshire Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*. He has published *Strategic Centrality: Indonesia's Changing Role in ASEAN* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000). His edited and co-edited volumes are: *Gus Dur and the Indonesian Economy* (2001); *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2001 and 2002 editions); and *Governance in Indonesia: Challenges Facing the Megawati Presidency* (2002). Dr. Smith is a graduate of the University of Waikato and the University of Auckland.

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Conclusions:

The general consensus on what constitutes Southeast Asia is the region covered by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The ten members of ASEAN are Brunei, Burma (Myanmar),¹ Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Membership in ASEAN, which has concluded various agreements on anti-terrorism, and has often forged a common foreign policy, does not imply a unified approach to U.S. action in Iraq. U.S. relationships in Southeast Asia range from intimate security relationships with Singapore and the Philippines to a nonrelationship in the case of Burma. Therefore the impact on U.S. relationships in this region will be varied.

Most relationships will, in fact, ride out possible adverse consequences from conflict in Iraq, but objections will be two-fold. While states like the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand could be described as generally supportive of the United States in the war against terrorism and are not alarmed by the doctrine of preemption, several other Southeast Asian states consistently have cited nonintervention and absolute state sovereignty to either oppose, or remain unengaged, in various interventions over the last decade. New ASEAN members like Burma, Laos, and Vietnam have been unhappy with "humanitarian intervention," being critical of the NATO operation in Kosovo, and refusing to be involved in the peacekeeping operation in East Timor. Therefore, armed invasion of Iraq will not sit well with these states, but they will do little more than verbally oppose it. Disagreement over an intervention, however, is nothing new in these relationships.

States with majority Muslim populations such as Indonesia and Malaysia will face popular discontent over a U.S. invasion of Iraq. States with minority Muslim populations will see similar discontent, but these sentiments will not have the same impact on government decisionmaking. The U.S. relationship with Indonesia is the most likely to be damaged by a conflict with Iraq. A protracted war in Iraq would be most damaging to U.S. relations with Southeast Asia's Islamic community.

Reactions to the Global War against Terrorism.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, outraged governments throughout Southeast Asia, as they did around the world. All Southeast Asian countries condemned the attacks and expressed sympathy to the United States and its people. Washington sought support, in particular, from both Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Within days President Megawati of Indonesia made a trip to the United States—a trip that was kept on track despite a general shut down of air traffic—in which the Indonesian leader denounced terrorism. The symbolism of the leader of the world's largest Muslim country decrying international terrorism was important to U.S. policymakers.

Megawati's resolve to back the United States evaporated once she returned to Indonesia. While international news media exaggerated the extent of potentially violent street protests in Jakarta—principally aimed at the U.S. Embassy—and tended to conflate them with wider public opinion, it became clear that Megawati could not count on the support of the Indonesian population to back up the United States in the counterattack against al Qaeda—namely the invasion of Afghanistan. First, many Indonesians surveyed were in denial about the nature of the terrorist attacks. After all, was not the Oklahoma City bombing initially blamed on Islamic terrorists? This event is well-known to the Indonesian public. Second, rumors circulated among the internet savvy that Mossad was behind the attacks, and that all Jews were sent text messages to stay away from the World Trade Center on September 11—the origin of these rumors was from the Middle East. Third, many Indonesians simply refused to believe that Osama bin Laden was guilty of the September 11 attacks and the evidence for this. Fourth, even when Osama bin Laden virtually confessed to the attacks, there was no support for a U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. Many political and religious leaders (and not just Muslims)

argued that bin Laden's guilt should be determined in an international court, not through force of arms (incidentally, this is entirely contrary to Indonesian obstinance over an international court for crimes in East Timor). Fifth, Megawati's political opponents used the events surrounding September 11 to pressure her. The Council of Ulama—a body set up by former president Soeharto and with ongoing links to the now opposition Golkar Party—even issued a call for “Jihad” against the United States.² Vice President and leader of the Islamist United Development Party (PPP), Hamzah Haz, undermined his president's U.S. visit by suggesting that the September 11 might “cleanse” the United States of its “sins.” He would later meet with the arrested head of the Islamist militia group Laskar Jihad, Ja'far Umar Thalib, and visit the boarding school of Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, head of Jemaah Islamiyah—an Al Qaeda affiliate. Megawati, as a woman and a nominal syncretic Muslim, is vulnerable to the charge that she is not an orthodox Muslim, and her opponents have indirectly tried to use this against her. The Bali bombing of October 12, 2002, which took around 200 lives (including 88 Australians), convinced a hitherto skeptical political and religious elite of the problem of homegrown terrorism, and strengthened the case for cooperation in the war against international terrorism.

In Indonesia two overlapping themes generally feed into distrust of U.S. motivations, especially as they relate to Afghanistan. For most Indonesians—Muslim and non-Muslim—there is a distrust of U.S. foreign policy. The reported CIA involvement in attempts to undermine President Soekarno in the 1950s, and a probable role in the counter-coup that took half a million lives in 1965-66, has left an indelible impression of U.S. meddling in Indonesian affairs. East Timor, hardships arising from the stipulations of the International Monetary Fund, and human rights demands are the latest manifestations. Also, a growing body of Muslim opinion in Indonesia believes that the United States, and the west in general, will intervene to defend

western interests or Christian populations, but fails to act when Muslims are in trouble. Generally this line was formed around the experience of East Timor, when in actuality the west has intervened a number of times on behalf of Muslim populations, for example, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and so on. Nonetheless, while many Indonesian officials view the U.S. military presence in the Asia/Pacific as benign, deep-seated suspicion about U.S. intentions still exists with regard to the Muslim world. Even moderates have accused Washington of trying to weaken the world of Islam. In this sense, the “clash of civilizations” hypothesis enjoys some currency with opinion makers in Indonesia.

Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia was equally vocal in condemning the terrorist attacks—and later went on to propose at the Organization of Islamic Conference that suicide bombings in Israel/Palestine also should be considered acts of terrorism. Like Megawati, however, Mahathir refused to support the U.S. counter-attack in Afghanistan. Mahathir has been a vocal critic of the west in the past, and the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party has shown Islamist tendencies with apostasy laws proposed in some states. Mahathir himself once declared that Malaysia was an “Islamic State.” (Although the Malaysian Constitution establishes Islam as the religion of the Federation of Malaysia, application of religious laws is left to the state authorities, who have interpreted this provision as a symbolic statement.) Mahathir, after September 11, became one of the most vocal Islamic leaders to criticize radical Islamist movements. This dramatic shift can be explained in terms of national interest and regime survival. Malaysia claimed to have already uncovered a terrorist threat on its own soil prior to September 11. Second, Mahathir saw an opportunity to drive a wedge between the opposition coalition of the Islamist PAS (Partai Islam SeMalaysia) and various pro-democracy parties (the opposition coalition split on September 22, 2001). In the 2000 election, UMNO had suffered one of its worst results, but Mahathir was able to

use international events to paint his PAS rivals as dangerous radicals—PAS played into his hands by declaring a “Jihad” against the United States (like the Indonesian Council of Ulama, they left this term ambiguous). PAS’ fortunes have declined ever since, as revealed in several by-election disappointments for the Islamist party, and Malay voters have largely returned to the UMNO fold.

In general, most Southeast Asian states have both supported the United States in the war against terror, as several of these states share the deep concern about the challenge international terrorism poses, not least of all because it has posed a direct threat to countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines (and to a lesser extent Thailand and Cambodia). Indonesia belatedly sought assistance in rounding up 40 members of the Jemaah Islamiyah in the aftermath of the Bali blast, and elite opinion has shifted to the extent that there is now recognition of the problem.

Current Reactions to U.S. Policy on Iraq.

Reactions to current U.S. policy with regards to Iraq are varied within Southeast Asia. The Philippines has been the most supportive of American policy, with or without UN backing. Singapore, the other nation-state in Southeast Asia that enjoys a close security relationship with the United States, is more guarded in arguing for a second United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution to resolve the impasse. Singapore traditionally has constructed its foreign policy in such a way as not to provoke its larger Muslim neighbors, and one understands the need to tread carefully. The other ASEAN states have all asked for a UN approach to the problem of Iraq. Vietnam, a constant proponent of absolute sovereignty, has argued for a “political solution . . . based on the respect of the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Iraq and in line with the United Nations Charter and

international law.”³ Cambodia argued against the use of violence, but has also urged Iraq to accept the UN process. Thailand has also urged the United States to go through UN channels, as have Malaysia and Indonesia. While both Malaysia and Indonesia accept that Iraq needs to dismantle its Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) capability, both governments have opposed the war option in this case—urging that inspectors be allowed to complete their work. In February 2003, Kuala Lumpur was host to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), in which Mahathir stated that the issue of Iraq would be discussed. Malaysia’s foreign minister, Syed Hamid Albar, did oppose the suggestions of some at the OIC that Saddam Hussein be encouraged into exile, urging that the UN process be maintained on course. He added: “We hold the view that whatever system of government practiced in a country or the system of government to be installed should be determined by the people of the country concerned.”⁴

In Indonesia’s case, Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda publicly has poured cold water on U.S. claims of Iraqi intransigence, saying that intelligence offered so far is less than adequate and that the work of the UN weapons inspectors is necessary to establish any guilt. Indonesia has staunchly opposed a U.S.-led attack that falls outside the UN process. Indonesia has long been an opponent of sanctions against Iraq, which were imposed after the 1990-91 Gulf War. During Abdurrahman Wahid’s term as head of state, the president made a visit to Iraq and used the occasion to champion the repeal of the sanctions regime. Reports of the plight of the Iraqi people are well-known in Indonesia, and are a source of anger against the west (and the United States in particular). It is significant, however, that Indonesia would accept a UNSC resolution on the current crisis, even if that meant a UN cover for any war effort in Iraq. An Indonesian foreign affairs spokesman told BBC News that while the government has faced domestic opposition on many foreign policy issues in the past, on the issue of Iraq the government is in accord with public

sentiment.⁵ In fact, Indonesia's approach can be explained on domestic grounds. Why should a UNSC resolution for war be more palatable than U.S. "preemption"? Having a UN sheen on an action in Iraq makes it far easier to explain to a domestic audience. Clearly a broad section of the Indonesian people are opposed to any war against Iraq, and Muslim groups and NGO groups (including some women's syndicates) have demonstrated against U.S. action in the Middle East. It is important to note that Indonesia's mainstream Muslim groups rejected Osama bin Laden's call for violent opposition to the United States. The Head of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, argues that the Iraq issue is principally political, and Muslims should not see this as a religious struggle. However, the fear, publicly expressed by both civic and religious leaders in Indonesia and throughout Southeast Asia, is that war in Iraq will lead many Southeast Asian Muslims to view the conflict as religious in nature.

The Possible Impact of War in Iraq.

Singapore's Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar was asked in a *CNN* interview in January 2003 what the consequences of a war with Iraq would be. He replied:

I think it will be a major complicating factor, particularly if it is seen as an action outside the auspices of the United Nations, and particularly if the presentation is not managed properly. By that I mean, if it is presented as a conflict aimed at Muslim populations or Muslim peoples, that will be unfortunate. It should be presented for what it really is, the issue of Weapons of Mass Destruction and disarmament. I think that it's important the presentation—focus on the WMD. If it is not, then I think countries that have predominantly Muslim population would find it a complicating issue.⁶

The great concern for Indonesia and Malaysia, and by extension Singapore—due its proximity—and states like Cambodia and Thailand with Muslim minorities that their governments hope will remain integrated within society, is

that international events could have a destabilizing influence.

As the U.S. counterattack against Afghanistan demonstrates, the nature of the war in Iraq, rather than war itself, will be the key determinant to the impact of any U.S. action in Iraq. While the prospect of an Afghanistan war initially elicited heated responses from Muslims in Southeast Asia, the relatively easy dispatch of the Taleban by the Northern Alliance, the clear rejoicing at the end of Taleban rule (or at least the impression that the war to defeat the Taleban enjoyed popular legitimacy), and the U.S. success in minimizing civilian casualties, worked to undermine public anger.

How a war with Iraq will affect Muslim populations in Southeast Asia—already jaded towards U.S. foreign policy—will depend greatly on the perceived conduct of the war itself. Overall, war in Iraq will increase anger directed at the United States. War in Iraq is an unknown entity. A critical question is, will the removal of Saddam Hussein be supported by the majority of Iraqi people? While military estimates of victory against Iraq in a full-scale invasion range from 2 weeks to a month, lack of domestic legitimacy in Iraq for any action by the United States could lead to widespread low level opposition (including the hard core of the Republican Guard or general insurgency) to the U.S.-led occupation. A further complication will be providing for the 60 percent of the Iraqi population who rely on government distribution for food needs with sustenance once the Iraqi lines of distribution have been disrupted.

If Saddam Hussein were to employ WMD whether in the battlefield, against Israel, or the United States, governments throughout Southeast Asia would accept that Iraq represents the same type of terrorist threat that al Qaeda poses (bearing in mind that some Southeast Asian governments do not accept a Saddam-bin Laden link at present). They also would largely go along with the UN resolution which would surely result, enabling the United

States and its allies to occupy Iraq. In the court of public opinion within Southeast Asia, massive attacks by Saddam Hussein would not play well, however some more radical groups would perceive such attacks as justice for America's "sins"—in fact, some Islamist groups may wholly support a WMD strike on Israel, in particular. On balance, most mainstream Muslim opinion, as wary as it is of U.S. policy (especially on Israel/Palestine), would be as critical of Saddam's use of WMD as it was of the al Qaeda attacks.

Economic Impact.

The potential impact of a war in Iraq will be great for all the Southeast Asian economies—with the exception of Burma which is barely integrated into the world economy. Most of the Southeast Asian economies depend heavily on trade and are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the global economy, which is likely to experience a downturn in the coming months. Rising prices will hit the oil consuming countries, but will provide the small consolation of better returns for Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia as net oil and gas exporters. However, the picture looks most gloomy for Indonesia, already coming off the worst financial meltdown of the Asian Financial Crisis. In 2002, investment levels halved from the previous year due to legal complications over political devolution to more than 300 districts and the emergence of domestic terrorism. The growth of a radical fringe in Indonesia, coupled with perceptions in the investor community (domestic and foreign) that Indonesia cannot curb such Jihadi groups (in contrast to Malaysia), will be a serious blow to Indonesia's economic growth.

Perceptions of U.S. Intentions and Motivations.

In a sense, the war against terrorism in the long run can only be won by winning public opinion within the Muslim world. Southeast Asian Muslims, famed for their moderate religious and political views and their smooth integration into secular society (the Southern Philippines is a partial

exception), distrust U.S. power projection. This is most evident in modern Indonesia for both nationalist and co-religionist reasons. Political and religious elites in Indonesia, and to some extent in Malaysia, see inconsistencies within the U.S. approach. Indonesian government officials have questioned Washington's view of what constitutes a "terrorist," given the refusal of the U.S. State Department to add the Aceh separatists to the list of international terror organizations—the United States will only call a group "terrorist" when it impacts on western interests, they argue. Both Malaysia and Indonesia note the apparent uneven nature of policy towards Israel, which has failed to allow a Palestinian state and also possesses WMD. While both the Malaysian and Indonesian governments do not fear encroachment by the United States and quietly welcome the U.S. force presence in littoral Asia, there remains, especially in Indonesia, a lingering fear of American attempts to establish some kind of imperial rule over the Islamic world.

For the rest of Southeast Asia, the dislike of intervention by the new ASEAN members notwithstanding, little will change. The United States will continue to be viewed as a benign hegemon.

Post-Conflict Reconstruction.

Support from the Philippines will be forthcoming. Singapore and Thailand, despite public pronouncements in support of the UN process, will support U.S. action—although for reasons of realpolitik, Singapore's position will be outwardly cautious. These three countries would be involved in a post-conflict peace building exercise if involvement in past UN operations is indicative. There is little chance that Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam will become involved in the war effort, or its aftermath—all are domestically focused and disinclined to participate in intervention missions, UN peacekeeping, or UN peacebuilding. For Malaysia and Indonesia, the constraints of

domestic opinion will be very obvious, and will limit possible support for the United States, although UN support will be the critical element for these countries. Regardless of the process of the war, Malaysia, and probably Indonesia, too, will attempt to contribute to a post-war settlement in Iraq.

Conclusions.

The Overall Impact on U.S. Standing and Partnerships in Southeast Asia.

A U.S. war in Iraq will impact differently on the various partnerships within Southeast Asia. Most of these relationships will remain as they were, with possible pressure on Malaysia and Indonesia over their ties to the United States. Even in Malaysia, one suspects, the Mahathir government can both control radical elements and sway more moderate Muslim opinion, and this relationship will ride out initial anger over the war. In Indonesia, public anger, and the actions of fringe terror groups, have the most potential to undermine the relationship—one that already has been under enormous strain. There, too, the U.S.-Indonesia relationship will outlive a disagreement over Iraq, but the levels of distrust in the United States may be notched up further and have implications for other sectors of interest.

The impact on the overall U.S. strategic position in Southeast Asia largely will be unchanged. The large number of port calls by the U.S. Navy to the countries of maritime Southeast Asia will continue as before, although there are no permanent bases in Southeast Asia. Two rumored options for further military engagement in the region, the re-establishment of a permanent presence in the Philippines and port visits to Vietnam, will also not be affected by war in Iraq. The impact of a war in Iraq will be felt on the diplomatic front, and it will involve the war against terrorism.

The Impact on the Pursuit of the War on Terrorism in Southeast Asia.

It remains the case that Malaysia and Indonesia have publicly expressed doubts about the links between Iraq and al Qaeda, and it would be fair to say that the Muslim community throughout Southeast Asia remains highly skeptical. But the prospect of war in Iraq does have implications for the war against terrorism, and again this is principally in Indonesia. Since September 11, the United States, Singapore, and Malaysia have had a very difficult task in urging the Indonesian government to take seriously the problem of international terrorism—especially as it relates to the Indonesian-based Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) group, an affiliate of al Qaeda. The Bali blast in 2002 changed this lethargy to some degree. Open opposition within the Indonesian public for a war against Saddam Hussein could translate into a strained relationship with the United States, which would impact ultimately on anti-terrorist efforts—or a government less inclined to be seen to be yielding to foreign “demands.”

Prolonged conflict in Iraq that brings with it enormous civilian deaths—from fighting or starvation—will touch an existing raw nerve and radicalize some within the Muslim community in Southeast Asia, possibly to join extremist groups, or to give them succor or sympathy. It is impossible to know the extent to which this might occur, but potentially war in Iraq, which very well carries its own merits, could prove to be seed for *jihadi* groups in Southeast Asia. A quick conquest of Iraq, with widespread legitimacy, will undercut this phenomenon.

The sizeable Muslim community in the Philippines, which has been considered in little detail in this report, will most likely be unhappy with U.S. intervention in Iraq; however, this population is in no position to exert pressure on government policy. The vast majority of Muslims are confined to the south of the Philippines, and the various ethnic groups of Mindanao and the surrounding islands are

very much alienated from the Philippines government. War in Iraq will not alter, either way, the difficulties of the Philippine Muslim south. The introduction of U.S. personnel to assist in training for combat operations against the Abu Sayyaf group (ASG) on Basilan island was the direct result of September 11. Although many have questioned whether ASG, largely a gang of kidnapers, are linked to bin Laden, al Qaeda operatives have attempted to contact separatist leaders in Mindanao. The United States will continue to provide support for the Philippines government in bringing its restive hinterland—not just the south, but the Maoist-oriented New People’s Army (NPA) areas—under control.

Recommendations.

Winning the hearts and minds of the Muslim community in Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia, is important in America’s war against global terrorism. Cooperation from governments in Southeast Asia will help prevent jihadi relocating from Central Asia, and will work against the emergence of domestic terror networks.

The conduct of the war in Iraq could have a dramatic impact on Southeast Asia’s Muslim communities. A quick war in Iraq with few civilian casualties, and one accepted by the Iraqi people, will convince Southeast Asia’s Muslims that the conflict was justified—or at least not some kind of latter day imperial conquest. An invasion that lacks support by the Iraqi people, one in which the United States become mired in low level conflict, will radicalize fringe groups within Southeast Asia against the United States.

Another critical component to legitimacy of action against Iraq would be UN support. Ideally the United States should work through the UN process in dealing with the Iraq problem. Any military action in the

future, were it to be sanctioned by the UN, would be vastly more palatable to countries like Indonesia and Singapore.

For the most part, relationships with Southeast Asia will be unaffected by war in Iraq, with Indonesia as the possible exception. If the war in Iraq is in America's national interest, it must be expected that this could have negative consequences for the war against jihadi groups in Indonesia.

The United States needs to continue stressing that Islam is not regarded as the enemy.

In the case of Iraq, the United States should continue pressing the point that the key issue revolves around removal of Saddam Hussein's potential for regional aggression, including WMD development, which poses a serious threat to Iraq's neighbors. Beyond the post-Iraq War settlement, serious attention to other conflict areas in the Middle East, particularly Israel/Palestine, will go a long way in convincing Muslim opinion in Southeast Asia the U.S. foreign policy has some consistency.

ENDNOTES

1. Even the name of the country itself is the subject of controversy. This paper utilizes "Burma" in accordance with the practice of the U.S. Government.

2. The term *Jihad* in Islam simply means to "struggle." The Council of Ulama refused to clarify what they meant by Jihad, which is usually seen as meaning "holy war" in the west.

3. Vietnam supports political solution to Iraqi issue," *BBC*, February 17, 2003.

4. "Malaysia Says No to Exile Proposal For Saddam," *Bernama*, February 10, 2003.

5. *BBC Radio*, February 14, 2003.

6. MFA Press Release, "CNN Interview with Singapore Foreign Minister Prof S Jayakumar," January 31, 2003. See *www.mfa.gov.sg*.

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