

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

9-2017

A wide anticommunist arc: Britain, ASEAN, and Nixon's triangular diplomacy

Wen-Qing (WEI Wenqing) NGOEI

Singapore Management University, wqngoei@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#)

Citation

NGOEI, Wen-Qing (WEI Wenqing).(2017). A wide anticommunist arc: Britain, ASEAN, and Nixon's triangular diplomacy. *Diplomatic History*, 41(5), 903-932.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/3207

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email library@smu.edu.sg.

“A Wide Anticommunist Arc”: Britain, ASEAN, and Nixon’s Triangular Diplomacy*

In the October 1967 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, presidential aspirant Richard Nixon exhorted his readers to pivot their gaze to the “rest of Asia.” The war in Vietnam, he argued, had too long “distorted our picture of Asia”—it “filled the screen of our minds; but it [should] not fill the map.” In Nixon’s view, the ongoing U.S. military campaign in Vietnam had “diverted Peking” from targets such as India, Thailand, and Malaysia; it had “bought vitally needed time” for Southeast Asia’s leaders to rout communist insurrections and to forge an “Asian regionalism” that contained Chinese expansionism. He asserted that “all around the rim of China,” the pro-West nations of Southeast Asia formed a geostrategic arc that stretched “from Japan to India,” an arc fortified by “occidental Australia and New Zealand” and “linked by the sea” to the United States. He envisioned this arc would “become so strong” that China must seek “dialogue” with the United States, whereupon he would subject the Chinese to “containment without isolation.”¹ Five years later, as president, Nixon translated this vision into triangular diplomacy with China and the USSR. He and Chinese leaders issued the Shanghai Communiqué in February 1972 to begin the process of normalizing relations. Three months later, Soviet officials welcomed Nixon to Moscow for a parallel resolution, hoping that détente with the United States might defuse the dual threat of NATO to its west and China to its east. In effect, Nixon had taken full advantage of what U.S. officials had envisioned since the early 1960s: “a wide anticommunist arc” of allies “enclosing the entire South China Sea.”²

*The author would like to thank *Diplomatic History’s* anonymous reviewers, Michael Allen, Daniel Immerwahr, Mark Atwood Lawrence, Chris Miller, Michael Sherry, and Jeffrey Winters for their insights and suggestions. This article was made possible by research funding and support from the Department of History at Northwestern University, the W. Stull Holt Dissertation Research Fellowship from SHAFR, the Nicholas D. Chabreja Center for Historical Studies, and the Rajawali Foundation at Northwestern University, the Chauncey Postdoctoral Fellowship at Yale, and Start-Up Grant No. M4081896.100 from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The article adapts material from the author’s book, *The Arc of Containment: Britain, Malaya, Singapore and the Rise of American Hegemony in Southeast Asia, 1941–1976*, forthcoming from Cornell University Press, Fall 2019.

1. Richard M. Nixon, “Asia After Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs* (October 1967): 111–112, 116, 123.

2. Memo from Roger Hilsman to the Secretary, “Prospects for Malaysia,” September 5, 1962, Personal Papers of James C. Thomson, Jr., box 22, general files 1961–1966, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (hereafter JFKL).

DIPLOMATIC HISTORY, Vol. 41, No. 5 (2017). © The Author 2017. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com. doi:10.1093/dh/dhx033

Advance Access publication on March 25, 2017

Nixon's triangular diplomacy succeeded because the "wide anticommunist arc" had largely confined the influence of both China and the USSR to the Indochinese states. Indeed, Beijing and Moscow welcomed détente with Washington in order to accommodate themselves to what they believed was *de facto* American hegemony in Southeast Asia. I argue that the "wide anticommunist arc" that underpinned U.S. hegemony in the region arose substantially from British policies toward postcolonial Singapore and the pro-U.S. diplomacy of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) leaders during the American war in Vietnam. As Britain withdrew its military from Singapore between the late 1960s and early 1970s, it created the FPDA (Five-Power Defense Arrangement) that entwined the defense systems of Malaysia and Singapore with that of Australia, New Zealand, and itself, albeit in a reduced role. The FPDA frustrated Soviet hopes of capitalizing on Britain's retreat from Singapore and the United States' anticipated exit from Vietnam. At the same time, ASEAN statesmen from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand forged intimate economic and military relations with the United States to resist Chinese influence and to strengthen their hands against homegrown socialist forces inspired by Vietnam's communist revolution. In so doing, ASEAN leaders contained China and reinforced U.S. predominance in the region. By the time Nixon initiated triangular diplomacy, most of Southeast Asia resembled a U.S. neocolonial system. Chinese leaders embraced Nixon's offer of rapprochement as well as ASEAN's formula for neutralizing Southeast Asia to avoid further isolation. The Soviets, confronting the prospect of Sino-U.S. amity, combined with their own failure to make inroads into Southeast Asia, were likewise eager for détente with the United States. Scholars have overlooked these broader patterns in the history of U.S. empire in Southeast Asia. With one eye trained on the American debacle in Vietnam; the other upon the "shock of the global" 1970s heralding an "age of limits" for the United States, many historians take for granted that Nixon turned to détente because of the U.S. government's diminishing power abroad and at home.³ Jeremi Suri has argued that détente was Nixon's conservative response to the civil unrest that had destabilized the U.S. government since the mid-1960s. To outflank domestic dissent, Nixon executed dramatic displays of international cooperation with likeminded conservative leaders in the USSR and China who also faced homegrown resistance to their authority.⁴ According to Daniel Sargent, Nixon pursued détente

3. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK, 2005), 194–195. See also Niall Ferguson, ed., *Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York, 2010); Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968–1980* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007) and Christopher Capozzola, "It Makes You Want to Believe in the Country: Celebrating the Bicentennial in an Age of Limits," in *America in the 1970s*, ed. Beth Bailey et al. (Lawrence, KS, 2004).

4. Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Keith L. Nelson, "Nixon, Brezhnev, and Détente," *Peace & Change* 16 (1991): 197–219. Although dated, Nelson's article is similar to Suri's arguments about the conservative impulses underpinning détente between the USSR and the United States.

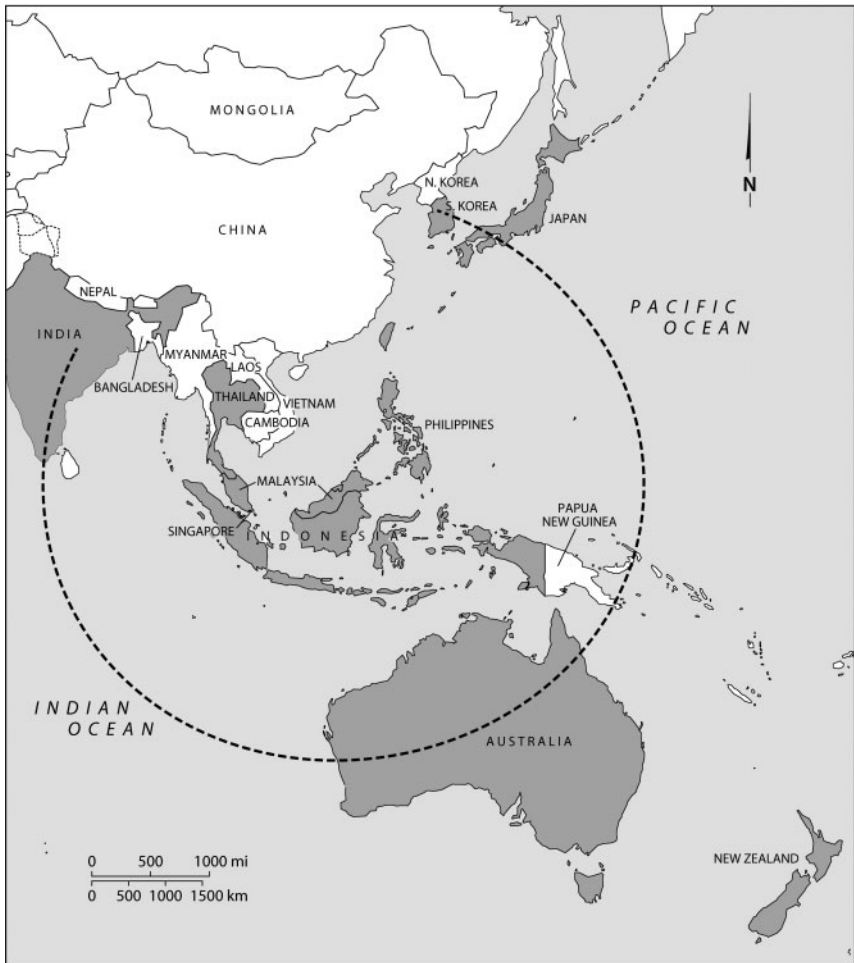


Figure 1 (Map): In the October 1967 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Nixon envisioned that the pro-West nations of the Asia Pacific (shaded in the above map) formed a geostrategic arc “all around the rim” of China. According to Nixon, the arc stretched “from Japan to India,” was anchored by “occidental Australia and New Zealand,” and “linked by the sea” to the United States.

to “stabilize the status quo” of the Cold War order and to stave off the “fracture and disruption” unleashed by the “ascent of the market . . . widening social inequality . . . [and] invigorated social, intellectual and political contestation.”⁵

5. Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford, UK, 2015), 9–10.

Though the United States faced serious challenges to its predominance in global affairs in the late 1960s, this article shows that Nixon undertook triangular diplomacy with the benefit of *de facto* U.S. hegemony in Southeast Asia. For one, the FPDA significantly, if unexpectedly, augmented the United States' strategic position against the USSR in Southeast Asia. Historians of American foreign relations, though, have ignored the FPDA. And the scholars who focus on the FPDA make few productive gestures at U.S. policy in Southeast Asia—they study instead how the FPDA typified or changed the dynamics of British retrenchment or else delve into its effects on the attitudes of policymakers in Britain, Australia, Malaysia, and Singapore.⁶

The literature specifically concerned with Soviet policy toward Southeast Asia as a region is sparse and dated.⁷ Despite acknowledging that the FPDA obstructed Soviet leaders' efforts to extend their influence in Southeast Asia, these works do not probe further into how the FPDA shaped broader Cold War rivalries. These studies all emphasize that Moscow's involvement in Southeast Asia was a function of its core objective in the global Cold War: promoting a Soviet-led world order that served as an alternative to the capitalist system dominated by the United States and Western powers. To this end, the USSR under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev (1953–1964) and Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982) attempted to “utilize the force of nationalism” across the decolonizing world. In Southeast Asia, Moscow thus eschewed any doctrinaire support for communist revolutionaries (unless, as in Vietnam, they evinced a realistic chance of success) and instead cultivated the region's non-communist nationalists with offers of Soviet economic and military aid. In this vein, the USSR strove in the late 1960s to capitalize on both Britain's decision to militarily withdraw from Singapore and the United States' waning commitment to Vietnam and its regional clients, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia.⁸ But the FPDA, as

6. For the FPDA in British retrenchment, see Andrea Benvenuti, “The Heath Government and British Defense Policy in Southeast Asia at the End of Empire (1970–71),” *Twentieth Century British History* 20 (2009): 53–73. For the Australian response to British retrenchment, see Andrea Benvenuti, “The British Military Withdrawal from Southeast Asia and its Impact on Australia's Cold War Strategic Interests,” *Cold War History* 5 (2005): 189–210; Andrea Benvenuti, “The British are ‘Taking to the Boat’: Australian Attempts to Forestall Britain's Military Disengagement from Southeast Asia, 1965–1966,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 20 (2009): 86–106; and Andrea Benvenuti and Moreen Dee, “The Five Power Defense Arrangements and the Reappraisal of British and Australian Policy Interests in Southeast Asia, 1970–5,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41 (2010): 101–123. For Malaysian and Singaporean views of the FPDA, see Chin Kin Wah, *The Defense of Malaysia and Singapore: The Transformation of a Security System, 1957–71* (Cambridge, UK, 1983) and Ang Cheng Guan, “Malaysia, Singapore, and the Road to the Five Power Defense Arrangements (FPDA), July 1970–November 1971,” *War & Society* 30 (2011): 207–225.

7. See Leszek Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy and Southeast Asia* (New York, 1986), R. A. Longmire, *Soviet Relations with South East Asia: An Historical Survey* (New York, 1989); and Bilveer Singh, *Soviet Relations with ASEAN* (Singapore, 1989). Charles B. McClane's landmark *Soviet Strategies in Southeast Asia: An Exploration of Eastern Policy under Lenin and Stalin* (Princeton, NJ, 1966) does not cover the period discussed in this article.

8. Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 9–11, 13–14, 49–52, 74; Singh, *Soviet Relations with ASEAN*, 2–3.

this article shows, dashed Soviet hopes of replacing the Anglo-American security umbrella with one reliant upon the USSR. In particular, the FPDA’s first joint exercise in 1970 so impressed Soviet officials with its scale that they came to think (inaccurately, in fact) that Britain would never remove its military presence from Southeast Asia and would continue to support U.S. policy in the region. The prospect of enduring Anglo-American dominance in non-communist Southeast Asia chilled Soviet leaders’ ambitions for the region and made them amenable to Nixon’s triangular diplomacy.

The emergence of the FPDA also intertwined with Moscow’s sense that it had lost the Sino-Soviet competition for influence over most of Southeast Asia’s communists. As one scholar of Soviet policy in Southeast Asia notes, Moscow’s general “policy of indifference” toward communist parties in Burma, Malaya, the Philippines, and Thailand encouraged them to turn to China for political and military assistance. Chinese leader Mao Zedong’s ideological predilection toward armed revolution and readiness to support insurgencies won many Third World communists away from the USSR, not just those in Southeast Asia.⁹ Indeed, recent scholarship underscores the global proportions of the Sino-Soviet conflict, contending that Moscow and Beijing’s competition for Hanoi’s allegiance represented but one theater of an international “clash of . . . two revolutionary programs, the [Chinese] anti-imperialist revolution and the [Soviet] anti-capitalist one,” unfolding “at the nexus of the Cold War and decolonization.”¹⁰ The pro-Chinese orientation of Southeast Asia’s communists saw the USSR vie more vigorously for the loyalty of the Vietnamese communists; it also became more urgent for the Soviets to cultivate non-communist Southeast Asia. The FPDA’s significance thus looms even larger. By the late 1960s, the USSR was actually caught in two intersecting global rivalries, one against the West and the other against what historian Jeremy Friedman terms the “shadow Cold War” against China. Worse, the Soviet Union was losing ground in both.¹¹ With the success of Nixon’s rapprochement with China in early 1972, after the FPDA came

9. Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 13–14, 51; Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750* (New York, 2012), 346, 418–419; and Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001), 63–71.

10. Jeremy S. Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015), 1; Nicholas Khoo, *Collateral Damage: The Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (New York, 2011); Lorenz M. Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: The Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ, 2008).

11. Leszek Buszynski, “The Soviet Union and Southeast Asia since the Fall of Saigon,” *Asian Survey* 21 (1981): 536–50; Muthiah Alagappa, “Soviet Policy in Southeast Asia: Toward Constructive Engagement,” *Pacific Affairs* 63 (1990): 321–50; Michael C. Williams, “New Soviet Policy toward Southeast Asia: Reorientation and Change,” *Asian Survey* 31 (1991): 364–77; Susanne Birgersson, “The Evolution of Soviet Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia: Implications for Russian Foreign Policy,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 23 (1997): 212–34.

into force in November 1971, Soviet leaders became eager to seek détente with the United States.¹²

ASEAN statesmen, for their part, enabled the rise of American hegemony in Southeast Asia at the expense of China's regional ambitions. However, major studies of American foreign relations argue that the United States' retreat from Vietnam represents the end of the "short-lived American empire" in Southeast Asia.¹³ This article shows instead that ASEAN leaders, determined to secure U.S. support for their authoritarian regimes, had so deepened their relations with the United States during the 1960s that the overall pro-U.S. tilt of ASEAN outlasted U.S. defeat in Vietnam. Soviet and Chinese sponsorship of their Vietnamese allies had only gained the communist powers a few localized triumphs in Indochina.

To be sure, the most valuable recent scholarship on ASEAN diplomacy obliquely ponders the fate of U.S. empire in the region while investigating the complex and conflicting approaches that ASEAN leaders adopted toward the Vietnam War.¹⁴ Even so, examining ASEAN leaders' attitudes exclusively through the prism of Vietnam obscures how the wide anticommunist arc in Southeast Asia—regardless of internal tensions—convinced Chinese leaders of their nation's strategic shortcomings vis-à-vis the United States and U.S. allies. And like major works of U.S. foreign relations with the same outsized focus upon Vietnam, such analyses of Southeast Asian diplomacy maintain that ASEAN leaders were disappointed by U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, shocked by Nixon's rapprochement with China, and had no choice but to fall in step with American policy.¹⁵ This article revises this well-worn narrative with close attention to the underappreciated agency of the ASEAN statesmen. For not only did the ASEAN leaders shore up U.S. hegemony in Southeast Asia, they also directly influenced how Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai discussed the normalization of Sino-U.S. relations with Nixon and U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. By revisiting American and Chinese accounts of Sino-U.S. talks in 1971 and 1972, this article illuminates what scholars have thus far ignored: that ASEAN leaders' efforts in the early 1970s to neutralize the region against the Cold War rivalry—proceeding Nixon's visit to China with diplomatic overtures to Zhou—underpinned the core

12. Nelson, "Nixon, Brezhnev, and Détente," 212–14; Telegram, Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, July 17, 1971, in *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969–1972*, ed. David C. Geyer et al. (Washington D.C., 2007), 401–404.

13. Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia Since World War II* (New York, 1999), 221–22; Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levine, *Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012).

14. Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War* (London, 2010), chaps. 4–5. H-Diplo Roundtable Review Volume XI, No. 46: Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War*, with commentaries by Anne L. Foster, Laura M. Calkins, Balazs Szalontai, Nicholas Tarling, and Robert H. Taylor, <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XI-46.pdf>, accessed March 18, 2016;

Even so, Ang's work makes little contribution to the history of U.S. foreign relations toward East and Southeast Asia during the Cold War, which is the principal focus of this article.

15. McMahon, *Limits of Empire*, 165–175; Ang, *Southeast Asia*, 94–95, 98–102.

principles of the Shanghai Communiqué and the success of Nixon's triangular diplomacy.

BRITAIN'S RETREAT, THE FPDA, AND SOVIET AMBITIONS IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA

In mid-1965, British officials, calculating that their country's sagging economy could no longer sustain its global military commitments, believed that Britain must focus on its European sphere of influence and vacate its air and naval complexes in Singapore and the few that remained in Malaysia.¹⁶ Britain's military bases, particularly those in Singapore, had been central to the fading Empire's claim to great power status after World War II. With more than 30,000 British troops, these bases were second in magnitude only to the British Army on the Rhine, the 50,000 soldiers Britain had committed to NATO.¹⁷ But the cost of maintaining the Singapore and Malaysia installations had ballooned to almost \$200 million annually, far outstripping Britain's earnings from holdings in either country.¹⁸ Under intense pressure from their colleagues, Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Defense Secretary Denis Healey felt forced to pull the British military from Singapore.¹⁹

Without the Singapore bases, British leaders anticipated it would be difficult to make substantial contributions to SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) in the future. Likewise, U.S. officials judged that Britain's staging facilities on Masirah and Gan, islands in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, were too distant for the British military to make a sustained impact on the Cold War in Southeast Asia.²⁰ President Lyndon Johnson could only write Wilson with "dismay" in January 1968, bemoaning British plans to withdraw completely from Singapore by 1971, leaving the United States to "man the ramparts all alone."²¹

Apart from weakening SEATO, Britain's retreat would also abrogate the Anglo-Malaysian Defense Agreement, which since 1957 had obligated the British to defend Malaysia as well as Singapore in the event of an external attack. Wilson and Healey, hoping to preserve the last vestiges of Britain's global power, cast about for ways to "appease their Southeast Asian

16. Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice between Europe and the World?* (London, 2002), 127–28.

17. Map of British Forces at Bases Overseas, undated, folder "United Kingdom: Memos, Vol. 13 [1 of 3]," box 212, National Security Files (hereafter NSF)—Country File (hereafter CF)—United Kingdom (UK), Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (hereafter LBJL).

18. Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat*, 127–28.

19. "Working Party on Singapore: Report to Ministers—OPD (65) 123," August 31, 1965, Colonial Office 968/838 (hereafter CO with reference numbers), National Archives of the UK (hereafter TNA).

20. Directorate of Intelligence, Intelligence Memorandum: The Economy of the United Kingdom After Devaluation, February 8, 1968, 7, 17–18, folder "United Kingdom: Memos, Vol. 13 [1 of 3]," box 212, NSF-CF-UK, LBJL.

21. Letter, Rostow to The President, January 11, 1968, folder "United Kingdom Vol. 13 [2 of 3]," Box 212, LBJ Papers, NSF-CF-UK, LBJL.

Commonwealth partners”—Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand—and “reassure [their] allies that [Britain] was not leaving the area defenseless.” Wilson thus promised Malaysia and Singapore an air defense system, including two large radar installations, about 100 military technicians to aid in their operation, several Rapier surface-to-air missiles, and training for Singapore’s pilots and airbase technicians. The British government also pledged to buoy Singapore and Malaysia with a regular share of the British foreign aid budget until the military rundown was complete in 1971.²²

More importantly, Britain planned to replace its military influence in Asia and Oceania with the FPDA.²³ In June 1968, British officials convened in Kuala Lumpur with their counterparts from Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore to weave their defenses into a collective security framework. American observers reported that the meeting “went off reasonably well.” Australian leaders, after all, treated Malaysia and Singapore as vital “forward defense” positions against the potential expansion of the Vietnam War into the wider region.²⁴ Malaysia’s Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman concurred with Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew that the FPDA was a necessity for their nations—the departure of Britain’s military would leave both without significant naval and air defenses.²⁵ Malaysian and Singaporean officials thus agreed to the joint use of each other’s air defense facilities to better coordinate operations while Australia and New Zealand pledged to maintain forces in both peninsular Malaysia and Singapore at least until 1971. The Kuala Lumpur conference lasted only two days but all parties arranged to meet in Canberra the next year to hammer out specifics, and to stage a joint military exercise in 1970 (the exercise was later termed *Bersatu Padu*, Malay for “Complete Unity”) to test their capabilities without British forces.²⁶

Sufficient agreement between the five nations would see the FPDA come into force in November 1971. But Britain’s allies probably felt they had no choice in the matter. Calling the FPDA an arrangement between five powers was, furthermore,

22. Directorate of Intelligence, Intelligence Memorandum: Britain Begins Implementation of Budget Cuts, February 6, 1968, 6, folder “United Kingdom: Memos, Vol. 13 [1 of 3],” box 212, NSF-CF-UK, LBJL.

23. Chin, *Defense*, esp. chap. 9.

24. Damon Bristow, “The Five Power Defense Arrangements: Southeast Asia’s Unknown Regional Security Organization,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27 (2005): 4.

25. Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in Southeast Asia, 1961–1965: Britain, the United States and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge, UK, 2002), 160–61; Memorandum of a Conversation (hereafter Memcon), March 8, 1966, 5, 8, folder “POL. Visits, Meetings. Singapore 1966,” box 1, Subject Files of the Office of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore Affairs (hereafter SFOIMSA), 1965–1974, Record Group 59 (hereafter RG with reference numbers), National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter USNA); Carlyle A. Thayer, “The Five Power Defense Arrangements: The Quiet Achiever,” *Security Challenges* 3 (2007): 81.

26. Briefing Memorandum “Malaysian Roundup,” July 11, 1968, 6, folder “E-1. General Policy. Plans. Programs. 1968,” box 1, SFOIMSA, 1965–74, RG 59, USNA. See also Chin Kin Wah, “The Five Power Defense Arrangements: Twenty Years After,” *The Pacific Review* 4 (1991): 193–203.

a misnomer. It actually served as Britain’s exit strategy from Southeast Asia, leaving behind four allies. Also, neither Malaysia nor Singapore could be considered a “power.” Singapore could not even provide one ship for the naval maneuvers of *Bersatu Padu* in 1970.²⁷ Worse, the FPDA on paper asked little of its strongest members. Should either Malaysia or Singapore face external aggression, FPDA members were required only to consult each other on the appropriate action. In fact, Britain had to go behind the scenes to coax Australia and New Zealand into stationing large numbers of troops in Singapore and Malaysia because the FPDA contained no such obligations.²⁸ Fortunately for Britain, the Australian government valued its alliance with the United States and the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, and United States) security pact, which had been in place since 1951. Thus, the Johnson administration had more success in prodding the Australians to “take the lead” and “assume a larger role” in the security of Malaysia and Singapore and, by extension, the FPDA. In equal measure, U.S. leaders managed to goad the New Zealand government to embrace the arrangement.²⁹ Regardless, Britain’s diminishing military presence during *Bersatu Pada* would prove in broad daylight that the FPDA had no bite and Britain’s Empire was truly finished in Southeast Asia.

Yet, as *Bersatu Padu* unfolded in Malaysia’s jungles from April through June 1970, British politics took an unexpected turn. The Conservative Party led by Edward Heath replaced the Wilson government in mid-June and promised a modest military presence in the Far East. Heath and his colleagues were not concerned with Malaysia and Singapore—they merely wished to reinforce Britain’s relationships with Australia and New Zealand.³⁰ According to one scholar, Heath thought Britain’s “actual physical presence” in the joint exercise would confer some “psychological benefits” upon its Commonwealth allies.³¹

Regardless of Heath’s intentions, *Bersatu Padu* suddenly swelled in size. A British MovieTone newsreel from June 1970 boasted that *Bersatu Padu* was a “giant.” Fifty warships, two hundred aircraft and 25,000 military personnel from the five nations were involved. The newsreel dwelled on a Commonwealth aircraft carrier knifing through the South China Sea and military helicopters clustering in the skies. With sweeping aerial shots surveying Malaysia’s territory, the film signaled that a dominant air force protected the nation. Britain’s 14,000 combat

27. Thayer, “Five Power,” 81.

28. Ralf Emmers, “The Role of the Five Power Defense Arrangements in the Southeast Asian security architecture,” RSIS (Rajaratnam School of International Studies) Working Paper, no. 195, Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2, 7.

29. U.S. Position Paper: U.K. Withdrawal from Malaysia/Singapore at the SEATO/ Seven Nation/ ANZUS Meeting (Wellington, New Zealand), March 27, 1968, 3; Memcon, “Future Australian Role in Malaysia/Singapore Security,” May 27, 1968, LBJL, Declassified Documents Reference System (hereafter DDRS).

30. Thayer, “Five Power,” 81; Benvenuti and Dee, “Reappraisal of British and Australian policy interests,” 102. See also Benvenuti, “Heath Government.”

31. Chin, *Defense*, 170–71.

troops and servicemen were deployed directly from the United Kingdom to Malaysia—over 7,500 miles—for the “largest peacetime airlift” the country had ever attempted. According to the voiceover, *Bersatu Padu* targeted an “unnamed country” in Southeast Asia that had been preparing for a “large scale attack” on Britain’s allies. But the scenes of the British-Malaysian jungle warfare school, Commonwealth military helicopters buzzing above Malaysia’s jungles, and soldiers rooting out “hostile forces and sympathizers” played by Malaysian and Gurkha troops in faux village hideouts were clearly reminiscent of the American war still raging in Vietnam. To jaunty music, the voiceover stated that *Bersatu Padu* proved Britain was “not leaving an exposed flank.”³²

Though *Bersatu Padu* appeared impressive to observers, the FPDA’s innate frailties troubled its members to no end. The joint exercise was expensive. One scholar states that Britain’s contribution alone ran upwards of \$3 million, but British officials likely volunteered this misleading figure for the record since it excluded the tremendous cost of British equipment as well as food and pay for its soldiers. Furthermore, *Bersatu Padu* required overseas troops to undergo six weeks of acclimatization, as well as the advance establishment of a Brigade headquarters, all of which cast doubt upon the efficacy of such long-range emergency deployments. Knowing Britain was determined to pull its military from the region, some Malaysian officials sneered that the FPDA was simply a public relations exercise.³³

Soviet leaders, though, took *Bersatu Padu* very seriously. In the years prior to the exercise, Russian officials had already let slip their anxieties at being unable to profit from Britain’s and the United States’ imminent military withdrawals from Southeast Asia. The Russians vented their insecurities quite publicly. In March 1968, *Izvestiya*, the Soviet government’s national publication, protested that Malaysia and Singapore, once the nodes of Britain’s military network, would simply enter the U.S. sphere of influence in Southeast Asia.³⁴ This scenario was not far-fetched. As Britain’s exit proceeded two years later, U.S. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird assured Nixon that since the United States had always made “extensive use of Singapore’s naval logistical support facilities,” it would continue to do so in the post-Vietnam era.³⁵ Equally, several Soviet officials suspected Britain’s retreat from Singapore was a mere feint. When Moscow received confirmation in early 1969 that Britain planned to create the FPDA, *Pravda*—the

32. *Bersatu Padu*, British MovieTone News Digital Archive, June 8, 1970, http://www.movietone.com/N_search.cfm?ActionFlag=back2ResultsView&start=1&pageStart=1&totalRecords=2&V_DateType=1&V_DECADE=1929&V_FromYear=1928&V_QualifySubject=&V_storyNumber=&V_TermsToOmit=&V_ToYear=1980&V_searchType=1&V_MainSubject=bersatu%20opa du&V_Year=1928&V_resultsPerPage=10, accessed September 22, 2016.

33. Chin, *Defense*, 172.

34. V. Skosyrev, “Kommivoyazher s Chuzhim Tovarom,” *Izvestiya*, March 15, 1968 quoted in Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 50.

35. Memorandum, Laird to Nixon, undated (likely January 1970), folder “NSSM 31,” box H-141, Nixon Presidential Materials Staff (hereafter NPMS), National Security Council (hereafter NSC) Institutional (“H”) Files—Study Memorandums (1969–74), National Security Study Memorandums (hereafter NSSM), Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library (hereafter RMNL).

official organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—complained that the arrangement enabled Britain to remain involved in Southeast Asia, buttressing U.S. military power.³⁶

These official Soviet statements were as much criticisms of Anglo-American policy as manifestations of an underlying sense of inferiority on the Kremlin's part. True, the USSR had in Vietnam proven to the United States and its Western allies that it could effectively support a proxy from afar.³⁷ Nonetheless, Moscow remained cognizant of the weak toehold that it had in the wider Southeast Asian region. By the late 1960s, besides the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and its southern ally, the National Liberation Front, most of the Southeast Asian groups carrying the communist bloc's ideological convictions had been decimated by anticommunist nationalists with American or British support. U.S. intelligence officials, though their leaders despaired over Vietnam, concluded in November 1968 that “Communist parties in Southeast Asia [had] fared poorly,” that communist insurgency now posed “less a threat in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines” than in the 1940s.³⁸ Furthermore, most of the communist parties of Southeast Asia tended to be pro-Chinese in their orientation, leaving the USSR with precious little sway over their leaders and policies.³⁹

Nonetheless, Moscow endeavored to enlarge its political presence in Southeast Asia. In 1969, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev set about trying to win ASEAN leaders' acceptance of a Soviet-led collective security system, hoping to find them receptive given the anticipated British and American retrenchment and the prospect of Chinese hegemony. From June of that year, Brezhnev and his lieutenants carried his proposal of collective security to the ASEAN states, only to have these overtures fall flat.⁴⁰ The virulently anticommunist Suharto regime of Indonesia, fresh from annihilating the PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia) in a bloody purge between 1965 and 1966, remained dead set against friendlier relations with the USSR and gravitated instead to the United States.⁴¹ The pro-U.S. Thai government, apart from inking a trade agreement with the USSR at the end of 1970, never warmed to the Soviet proposal and continued to host U.S. military bases and troops. The Philippines, an ally of the United States well before the onset of the Cold War, would not even establish relations with the USSR until

36. Erik Alekseev, “Zapasnyew Pozitsii,” *Pravda*, March 5, 1969 (quoted in Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 50).

37. Westad, *Global Cold War*, 194.

38. Director of Central Intelligence, National Intelligence Estimate: Southeast Asia After Vietnam, November 14, 1968, 3, CIA Freedom of Information Act (hereafter FOIA) Reading Room, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001166458.pdf, accessed July 14, 2016.

39. Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 13, 24.

40. Bilveer Singh, *The Soviet Union in Singapore's Foreign Policy: An Analysis* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1990), 21; Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 40–96.

41. Bradley Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesia Relations, 1960–8* (Stanford, CA, 2008); John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'état in Indonesia* (Madison, WI, 2006).

1976.⁴² Malaysian leaders cautiously opened diplomatic relations with the USSR in the late 1960s to hedge against U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam but they resolutely spurned Brezhnev's proposal.⁴³

For Russian officials already disappointed by the foundering of their collective security proposal, the creation of the FPDA promised to close even Singapore and its naval installations to the USSR's fleet. The election of the conservative Heath government in June 1970 had stoked Soviet insecurities.⁴⁴ And as *Bersatu Padu* enjoyed Heath's belated military supplements that same month, Russian officials grew shrill, excoriating the FPDA as a "blood relative" of Western defense pacts like NATO, SEATO, and CENTO.⁴⁵ Treating *Bersatu Padu* as evidence that the FPDA was already up and running, Russian officials rued a missed opportunity. Well after the exercise concluded, *Izvestiya* commentaries continued to carp that Britain's "imperialist" impulses shone through the FPDA.⁴⁶

In truth, *Bersatu Padu* was a pageant starring an empire long gone. Yet it had bought for Britain, the members of the FPDA, and the United States, what international relations scholars have called a "political and psychological deterrent" to rival powers.⁴⁷ The Russians, apparently at a loss for how to address their strategic disadvantage in Southeast Asia, continued to issue florid denunciations of the FPDA apparently fixated on the one extravagant display that was *Bersatu Padu*. Almost a year after the exercise, Russian journalist I. Shatalov wrote with dread and awe about the FPDA and *Bersatu Padu* in *International Affairs*, a publication of *Izvestiya's* printing house. He recounted how Britain had moved "two battalions with engineers, gunners and a signal service, as well as 200 armored carriers, artillery, 20 helicopters and several thousands of tons of military equipment across 8,000 miles" in only twenty hours. To his mind, *Bersatu Padu* was a "rehearsal for [a] future 'flexible response,'" and the FPDA a full-blown "British-sponsored military bloc" that enabled the other "imperialist powers" (meaning the United States) to dominate Southeast Asia.⁴⁸ *Izvestiya* echoed, insisting that the FPDA had "knocked together a military bloc"—a "mini-NATO"—that preserved British interests in Southeast Asia while ensuring Singapore's military facilities served the U.S. Cold War agenda.⁴⁹

42. Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 69–70, 72–73, 79, 82.

43. Ang, *Southeast Asia*, 56–57.

44. Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 50.

45. Singh, *Singapore's Foreign Policy*, 23.

46. V. Matveev, "Krizis Politiki Sily," *Izvestiya*, November 10, 1970, quoted in Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 50.

47. Emmers, "Role of the Five Power Defense," 8. Among others, Emmers quotes Ang Wee Han, "Five Power Defense Arrangements: A Singapore Perspective," *Pointer: Quarterly Journal of the Singapore Armed Forces* 24 (2008): 49–59.

48. I. Shatalov, "At the Junction of Eras and Continents," *International Affairs* (April 1971): 93–94.

49. V. Kobyshev, "Skolachivayut Voennyi Blok," *Izvestiya*, April 17, 1971 quoted in Buszynski, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 51.



Figure 2: Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and President Richard Nixon shake hands in the Grand Kremlin Palace, thawing relations between their nations with the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) agreement on May 26, 1972. Senior Soviet officials had become eager to pursue rapprochement with the United States following several strategic setbacks in Southeast Asia. Courtesy of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum.

We should expect such hyperbole from the Soviet government’s official publications. But these responses, given Brezhnev’s failure to sell the Soviet-led security system to ASEAN, betrayed Soviet officials’ abiding feelings of inadequacy when competing with the Anglo-American powers and China for influence in Southeast Asia. Well before *Bersatu Padu*, Russian officials had already, perhaps in a moment of weakness, confided in their American counterparts that Moscow considered U.S. predominance in Southeast Asia a “desirable” check against China, their “common enemy” in the region.⁵⁰ Shatalov’s report about the FPDA, in combination with the *Izvestiya* and *Pravda* commentaries, revealed (and by repetition likely reinforced) Moscow’s resignation to U.S. hegemony in the region. In Shatalov’s appraisal, the FPDA had drawn a “gigantic military triangle” in Southeast Asia “in conjunction with the U.S.,” a triangle served by Masirah, British bases in Singapore, and American military facilities in Diego Garcia. He also warned that American companies such as Lockheed, which repaired military aircraft being used in Vietnam, were poised to establish in Singapore the “largest commercial aircraft repair center in Southeast Asia.” In his estimation, the “American military umbrella [would soon] open up over

⁵⁰ Telegram, U.S. Embassy (London) to Secretary of State (Washington D.C.), November 1968, LBJL, DDRS.

Singapore,” and the USSR could expect little more from cultivating relations with this former stronghold of the British Empire.⁵¹ Coupled with this, Britain’s retreat from the region had Malaysian leaders aggressively seeking U.S. military equipment for their national defense system.⁵² *Izvestiya* had foretold in 1968 that the United States would incorporate Malaysia and Singapore into its sphere of influence; the FPDA for all its flaws seemed to fulfill this bleak vision.

Despite Britain’s military retreat, the FPDA had unexpectedly enhanced the United States’ position in Southeast Asia against the USSR. The Soviet Union had never struggled for hegemony in the region as fervently as the United States, and Moscow’s belated hopes of winning ASEAN away from the United States had foundered as well. From the time of *Bersatu Padu* through the fall of Saigon, Soviet officials could only broadcast regular condemnations of the ASEAN nations, calling them intimate allies of the United States, inadvertently disclosing Moscow’s paltry influence in the region outside of Vietnam.⁵³ When Nixon announced in July 1971 that he would visit China, Soviet leaders were eager to thaw the Cold War, and primed for the U.S. leader’s triangular diplomacy.⁵⁴

AN AMERICAN EMPIRE OF (FORMER) DOMINOES

Like the FPDA did to Soviet ambitions in Southeast Asia, ASEAN leaders’ pro-U.S. diplomacy thwarted Beijing’s expansionism in the region. It was an open secret that ASEAN—created in August 1967 with a big push from Indonesia’s foreign minister Adam Malik—succeeded the Tunku’s explicitly pro-West ASA (Association of Southeast Asia) that had comprised Malaya, Thailand, and the Philippines.⁵⁵ Within a day of ASEAN’s formation, officials of the U.S. National Security Council (NSC) expressed delight that Indonesia had helped to establish a grouping of the avowed anticommunist nations of the region. But U.S. officials had for years worried that the Southeast Asian states were teetering dominoes in danger of falling to communism, and this anxiety proved hard to shake in the shadow of Vietnam. Still unsure of how far ASEAN would resist or accommodate communist influence emanating from Vietnam and China, Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy modestly pronounced the organization a “good and promising” development.⁵⁶

In fact, ASEAN statesmen decidedly cast their lot with the United States in order to acquire assistance against domestic socialist forces and to obstruct the

51. Shatalov, “At the Junction,” 90, 92, 94.

52. “Fact Sheet—Malaysia,” April 29, 1971, Folder “Chron 1971: Background and Briefings: Kuala Lumpur,” box 10, RG 59: SFOIMSA, 1965–74, USNA.

53. Singh, *Soviet Relations*, 40.

54. Telegram, Dobrynin to Soviet Foreign Ministry, July 17, 1971 Telegram, Dobrynin to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, July 17, 1971 in *Soviet-American Relations*, 401–4.

55. Johan Saravanamuttu, *Malaysia’s Foreign Policy: The First Fifty Years—Alignment, Neutralism, Islamism* (Singapore, 2010), 102.

56. Notes of the President’s Meeting with the NSC, 9 August 1967, folder “August 9, 1967—12:20 p.m. NSC,” box 1, Tom Johnson’s Notes of Meetings, LBJL.

expansion of Chinese power in the region. The United States’ immense economic and military capacity allowed it to wage war in Vietnam at the cost of tens of billions of dollars a year while still underwriting ASEAN’s rightward tendencies. This rapidly entrenched what international relations scholar Amitav Acharya has called the “ideological polarization” of the region.⁵⁷ When U.S. leaders’ support for the Saigon government finally waned in the early 1970s, the U.S.-ASEAN alliance—the wide anticommunist arc—had already encircled China and Vietnam. Though the Vietnam War remains historically significant, the intensifying collaboration between ASEAN leaders and their American allies to contain Vietnam and China is more characteristic of the trajectory of the Cold War in Southeast Asia.

Take the case of Indonesia: Washington and Jakarta’s relationship warmed rapidly as President Suharto shifted his government further into the American orbit. In October 1967, the same month that Nixon’s article appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, Indonesian leaders suspended diplomatic relations with China, withdrew their personnel from Beijing, and sent Chinese ambassadorial staff in Jakarta packing. Adam Malik also informed U.S. officials that Indonesia was solidly behind the United States’ effort in Vietnam though Jakarta might occasionally voice muted criticisms of U.S. policy for the sake of appearing neutral.⁵⁸ These moves to the right proved profitable for Suharto’s government. By 1970, most of the expanding private investment pouring into Indonesia, along with generous loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, came from the coffers of American businessmen or the U.S. government.⁵⁹

And when the United States invaded Cambodia in late April 1970, supposedly to forestall North Vietnamese attacks on South Vietnam from Cambodian sanctuaries, Indonesia spied the chance (as Malik said it would) to burnish its neutralist credentials and conceal its fervent anticommunism. With Suharto’s blessing, Malik took a stab at mediating the Cambodian crisis, cobbling together the Jakarta Conference to, in Suharto’s words, “restor[e] peace in a neighboring country.” The Indonesian government invited the leaders of ASEAN, India, China, North Korea, and North Vietnam to convene in Jakarta in mid-May, making a show of its neutrality with respect to the Cambodian conflict. Indonesian leaders fully expected the communist states would decline (which they did) but hoped at least that India would attend and authenticate Indonesia’s claims of neutrality.⁶⁰

Indian leaders, along with those of many other states invited to Jakarta, would not be fooled. They refused to attend and insisted the conference was “polarized”

57. Amitav Acharya, *The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of a Region* (Ithaca, NY, 2013), 161.

58. Ang, *Southeast Asia*, 49.

59. Memcon (Suharto, Nixon, and Kissinger), May 26, 1970, Folder “MemCon—The President/Pres. Suharto/ Kissinger, May 26, 1970”, box 1024, NPMS, NSC Files, Presidential/Henry A. Kissinger (hereafter HAK) Memcons, RMNL.

60. Ang, *Southeast Asia*, 80–81, 86–87.

from the outset. In fact, Indonesian leaders had always harbored sympathy for the anticommunist faction of Cambodia led by General Lon Nol, who in March 1970 had seized power from the neutral (but essentially pro-China) Prince Sihanouk. Furthermore, Indonesian military leaders had in November 1969 and January 1970 secretly welcomed their Cambodian counterparts to study how Suharto and the army had executed their coup d'état against the left-leaning Sukarno. When Lon Nol finally took control of Cambodia, he requested and immediately received assistance from an Indonesian military mission.⁶¹

However genuine Indonesia's peacemaking efforts, the promise of American aid whenever Indonesia upheld the U.S. Cold War agenda held the greater appeal for Suharto. Only ten days after the Jakarta Conference, in pursuit of rewards from the United States, Suharto bragged to Nixon that he had "nullified" Indonesia's communists, that "tens of thousands of these [had] been interrogated and placed in detention." He added that Indonesian students had "received indoctrination" to snuff out their sympathy for communism, fitting them for service in his New Order.⁶² As expected, Nixon smiled upon these efforts, tripling the American Military Assistance Program to Indonesia.⁶³

Suharto also readily accepted Nixon's challenge to "play a big role in Southeast Asia," which he took as a call to openly support the Lon Nol government.⁶⁴ In short order, Suharto directed the Indonesian Army to boost Lon Nol's efforts against a North Vietnamese invasion that had been launched with Chinese assistance. Indonesia furnished Cambodia with 25,000 AK-47 rifles (and requested the United States replenish Indonesian caches with American-made weapons), crafted anti-guerrilla training programs for Cambodian troops, and maintained a brigade of Indonesian forces to be "projected into trouble-spots" on the Asian mainland with U.S. air and amphibious support.⁶⁵ Of course, the communist factions in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos would eventually triumph in 1975. But the firm alliance between the United States and the Suharto regime continued to deepen, strengthening the pro-U.S. dictatorship of the largest state at the center of the anticommunist arc.

Singapore, the smallest state in the arc, dominated by the authoritarian Prime Minister Lee's PAP (the People's Action Party), also trod the path of alignment with the United States. Lee and his lieutenants believed it was good business. To

61. Ang, *Southeast Asia*, 86–87, 80–81.

62. Memcon (Suharto, Nixon and Kissinger), 26 May 1970, folder "MemCon—The President/Pres. Suharto/ Kissinger, May 26, 1970", box 1024, NPMS, NSC Files, Presidential/HAK Memcons, RMNL.

63. Memcon (H. Alamsjah, Indonesian State Secretary and Kissinger), May 27, 1970, folder "MemCon—Alamsjah/ Kissinger/ Holdridge, May 27, 1970," box 1024, NPMS, NSC Files, Presidential/HAK Memcons; "Background—Military Assistance to Indonesia," May 18, 1970, folder "Indonesia: President Suharto State Visit, May 26–June 1, 1970 [1 of 2]", box 919, NPMS, NSC Files, VIP Visits, RMNL.

64. Memcon (H. Alamsjah, Indonesian State Secretary and Kissinger), May 27, 1970.

65. Memorandum Haig to Kissinger, July 7, 1970, folder "MemCon-Sumitro/Kissinger (L.A.), July 2, 1970, box 1024, NPMS, NSC Files, Presidential/HAK Memcons, RMNL.

bring the island a minor American spending boom, the PAP agreed in February 1966 that U.S. troops from Vietnam could visit Singapore for R&R, a decision that also presented Lee an opportunity to further undermine his political opponents.⁶⁶ Indeed, the leftwing politicians and labor unionists that the PAP had persecuted since the early 1960s were predictably up in arms over the presence of U.S. troops in Singapore. In May 1966, the labor unions published a tract in Mandarin—since about 75% of the country was ethnic Chinese—deploring the “PAP puppet regime” and its complicity with the U.S.-British imperialist campaign in Vietnam.⁶⁷ An attached cartoon depicted Johnson and Lee, arms around each other, the U.S. leader cradling Lee’s face as if to kiss his pursed lips, while wounded American soldiers hobbled through Johnson’s comically spread legs toward their “holiday in Singapore” (*dao xing du jia*).⁶⁸ Even then, Lee waited for a more opportune moment to retaliate, making his move only when his opponents finally gathered enough momentum to organize public demonstrations. Lee then led the PAP to swiftly pass a capacious bill against vandalism that—in his own words—targeted those who “went about shouting and carrying anti-American . . . and pro-Vietcong slogans;” swamped local newspapers with rulings against printing stories about his support for U.S. policy in Vietnam; and had the police incarcerate the leaders of the demonstrations in one fell swoop.⁶⁹

For Singapore, the richest Asian state after Japan, U.S. intervention in Vietnam was a money-spinner and the PAP was resolved to scotch any domestic opposition to the war. By 1967, U.S. officials reported that the “growing volume of U.S. military procurement for Vietnam in Singapore” accounted for fifteen percent of the country’s national income. The British bases in Singapore that pumped some \$200 million into the economy contributed only slightly more at twenty percent.⁷⁰ Moreover, Singapore served as the regional petroleum-refining center, which made the city-state indispensable to the U.S. war campaign, opening yet another substantial revenue stream for the PAP.⁷¹ U.S. officials learned as well that the PAP used its impressive economic record to legitimate and execute its program

66. Ang, *Southeast Asia*, 28.

67. “*Xin jia po ge gong tuan lian he qing zhu wu yi lao dong jie da hui tuan an*” [Proposal on celebration of labor day by the various unions and clubs of Singapore], May 1, 1966, NA 1183, National Archives of Singapore (hereafter NAS).

68. “*Quan xing zuo pai gong tuan lian he qing zhu wu yi guo ji lao dong jie qun zhong da hui ling shi dong yi*” [May Day Commemoration Conference Temporary Motion], May 1, 1966, NA 1183, NAS.

69. Ang, *Southeast Asia*, 28–29.

70. Map of British Forces at Bases Overseas, undated (likely February 1968), folder “United Kingdom: Memos, Vol. 13 [1 of 3],” box 212, NSF-CF—UK, LBJL.

71. Talking Points for Mr. Bundy, December 15, 1965; Briefing Memorandum (Singapore) for Mr. Bundy—Tab 3: Singapore-United States Economic Relations,” February 17, 1966, folder “POL 1 General Policy. Background. Singapore 1966,” box 1, SFOI/MSA, 1965–74, RG 59, USNA; CIA, “Singapore on the Eve of Lee Kuan Yew’s Visit to the US,” October 6, 1967, 7–8, CIA FOIA Reading Room, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000261024.pdf, accessed July 14, 2016; Acharya, *Making of Southeast Asia*, 161.

of creating a “tightly knit society,” touting the old saw to Singaporeans that only orderly and stable societies enticed the world’s high-rolling investors. The Americans knew, though, that “tightly knit” was shorthand for “increasing the government’s control over the political life of the country.” As proof, the CIA cited the PAP’s Societies Ordinance of 1966, which like its close cousin the anti-vandalism bill gave Lee and his team “almost unlimited power to control, approve, or outlaw” any organization. To boot, the PAP banned public utility strikes to permanently strangle any leftist activism.⁷²

If the PAP’s tightening vise in Singapore had ever troubled Johnson, it became a non-issue in October 1967 when Lee pledged his “unequivocal” support for U.S. policy in Vietnam in a personal letter to Johnson. Lee vowed to convince American opinion-makers that Asian leaders, like himself, genuinely endorsed the Vietnam War.⁷³ Throughout the final year of the Johnson presidency, Lee used every opportunity to insist publicly that “by fulfilling its commitment in Viet-Nam, the United States was in effect ‘buying time’ for the other nations of Southeast Asia, permitting them to strengthen their own defenses and economies.”⁷⁴ And because Johnson valued Lee’s support, he confided in Lee that “guided by [his] counsel” the United States would “keep on a steady course in Vietnam.”⁷⁵

Lee provided the same services to Kissinger and Nixon. The U.S. dollars pouring into Singapore would offset Britain’s military retreat, ample reason for Lee to keep the Americans locked into the region. State Department officials had estimated in 1969 that private American investments in Singapore, given the city-state’s renowned political stability and blossoming relationship with United States, were “growing at a phenomenal \$100 million per year!”⁷⁶ Consequently, Lee proposed to Kissinger that a “statement by an Asian neutral leader, such as himself”—though not neutral in reality—“urging the American public not to ‘sell out’ [Saigon] might reduce domestic pressures” on Nixon to withdraw from Vietnam.⁷⁷ Kissinger heartily recommended Lee to Nixon, who warmly welcomed the offer.⁷⁸

The United States’ unpopular war in Vietnam had yet other ardent supporters within ASEAN. Malaysia’s leaders, ever wary of “Chinese pressures” and how the Vietnamese communists could inspire even the depleted ranks of the Malayan

72. “Singapore on the Eve of Lee Kuan Yew’s Visit to the US,” 5–7.

73. Letter, Lee Kuan Yew to President Johnson *c/o* Bundy, October 27, 1967, DDRS.

74. “VII. East Asia, J. Malaysia and Singapore,” undated (likely December 1968/ January 1969), 17, folder “Chapter 7 (East Asia): Sections G–J,” box 3, LBJ Papers, Administrative History (hereafter AH), Department of State (hereafter DOS), vol. I, chaps. 7–9, LBJL.

75. Letter, Johnson to Lee, December 25, 1967, folder “Singapore: Presidential Correspondence,” box 50, LBJ Papers, NSF—Special Head of State Correspondence, LBJL.

76. “The American Presence in Singapore: Background Paper,” undated (likely 1969), folder “V.P. Agnew’s Trip—Singapore Visit Briefing Book,” box 83, NSC Files—Henry A. Kissinger Office Files (hereafter HAKOF), CF—Far East, RMNL, exclamation mark in original.

77. Memorandum for the President, March 19, 1969, folder “Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew Information Visit, 13 May 1969,” box 938, NPMS, NSC Files—VIP Visits, RMNL.

78. Memorandum (Kissinger to Nixon), undated (likely March 1969), folder “Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew Information Visit, 13 May 1969,” box 938, NPMS, NSC Files—VIP Visits, RMNL.

Communist Party, were determined to reinforce the United States' commitment to Southeast Asia.⁷⁹ In any case, the United States was Malaysia's second largest export market after Singapore, which saw Malaysian leader Tunku Abdul Rahman seek all means of strengthening the already warm U.S.-Malaysian ties.⁸⁰ The Tunku was one of the more eloquent supporters of U.S. military intervention in Vietnam. U.S. leaders were especially taken with him since the Johnson administration's "More Flags" campaign had failed to collect many of its allies' declaration of support for, and commitment to, Americanizing the Vietnam conflict.⁸¹ In combing through ASEAN leaders' speeches and writings, U.S. officials drew cheer from the Tunku's statement in a July 1965 issue of *Foreign Affairs* that "we in Malaysia fully support Washington's actions" against North Vietnam. Between 1966 and 1967, the Americans also noted with appreciation that the Tunku repeatedly affirmed South Vietnam's "right to defend their territorial integrity" with American assistance, which made it "imperative" that the United States "not retire from the scene." U.S. policymakers probably savored how the Tunku thundered at the 1967 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London that "those who criticize the Americans for their assistance to South Vietnam should not be blind to the intervention of Communist powers in the war in Vietnam."⁸² With great relief, the State Department reported in 1969 that Malaysia had been a "continuous and forthright supporter of the U.S. policy in Viet-Nam."⁸³

Like the leaders of Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia, Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, Thailand's military dictator from 1963 through 1973, firmly committed his government to the Vietnam War. Thanom's predecessors had since 1950 taken up the American anticommunist cause, convinced that allying with the United States would ward off the perceived threat of Chinese communism to Thai security. As the war in Vietnam escalated, Thanom determined he must hold the United States even closer, not least because Thailand's borders ran alongside Laos and Cambodia, through which the Ho Chi Minh trail snaked. By 1968, the CIA concluded that Thai leaders had "limited options" for trying out a new patron "because of [Thailand's] longstanding and unequivocal commitment to military alliance with the U.S.," an alliance the Thai elites admitted to American officials remained "indispensable" to counter any "threat from China." On Thanom's

79. Ang, *Southeast Asia*, 31–32.

80. "Fact Sheet—Malaysia," 29 April 1971, Folder "Chron 1971: Background and Briefings: Kuala Lumpur," box 10, RG 59, SFOIMSA, 1965–74, USNA.

81. Fredrik Logevall, "There Ain't No Daylight: Lyndon Johnson and the Politics of Escalation," in *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Mark Philip Bradley et al. (Oxford, UK, 2008), 95–96. Here, Logevall refers to Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson, NC, 1994).

82. "Malaysia's diplomatic support for South Vietnam/ American effort in Vietnam," undated (likely late 1967), LBJL, DDRS.

83. "VII. East Asia, J. Malaysia and Singapore," 17.

watch, Thai troops joined U.S. soldiers in the Vietnamese jungles while American B-52s bombers flew sorties out of U-Tapao, a Thai airbase near the Gulf of Siam, to pulverize Vietnam from 1965 through the early 1970s.⁸⁴ Over that period, U.S. military intervention in Vietnam pumped some \$3.5 billion in military and economic aid into Thailand, increasing Thailand's economic reliance on the United States and its government's determination to remain aligned to Washington.⁸⁵

Even Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos's attempts to exploit the Vietnam War for his own political ends tied his fate to U.S. support, ensuring the Philippine archipelago at the eastern end of the anticommunist arc remained within the American empire of former dominoes. Ever alert to how he might milk the United States' involvement in Southeast Asia, Marcos sensed how desperately Johnson wanted the Philippines to back the war effort in Vietnam. According to journalist Stanley Karnow, Marcos delayed committing Filipino troops to Vietnam until September 1966—over a year after U.S. forces had been deployed, when he thought Johnson most vulnerable. Marcos then promised to raise ten Filipino battalions (on the American dollar) for Vietnam so long as he could retain large numbers of these troops for his own protection. Johnson caved, funneling an additional \$80 million to Marcos beyond the military subsidy, doing so despite the fact that Marcos sent just a token force to Vietnam.⁸⁶ Yet Marcos's machinations also made his regime, like Thanom's, more dependent on American backing. This state of affairs would only intensify in 1972 when Marcos—desperate to retain power as his legitimacy dwindled at home—sought U.S. support for his ascension to dictatorship.⁸⁷

When President Nixon entered the White House in early 1969, State Department officials had begun to echo his earlier assertions in *Foreign Affairs* about the United States' strategic advantage in Asia. The State Department's reports paid close attention to how ASEAN and other regional groups' "multilateral undertakings" had "further strengthen[ed] the fabric of non-communist Asia." With cautious optimism, they detailed the intersecting organizations that had incorporated ASEAN into a sprawling network of pro-U.S. and anticommunist countries. Here are but two of the State Department's extensive list: Formed in 1965, the Japanese-led Asian Parliamentarians Union plugged ASEAN into cooperation with Taiwan, Korea, Laos, Australia, India, and New Zealand. According to the State Department, this organization pooled these countries' resources for "Free World causes in Southeast Asia"—in effect, U.S. Cold War objectives in the region. The stridently anticommunist ASPAC (Asian and

84. Director of Central Intelligence, National Intelligence Estimate: Southeast Asia After Vietnam, 14 November 1968, 9, CIA FOIA Reading Room, accessed 20 January 2015.

85. Acharya, *Making of Southeast Asia*, 160.

86. Stanley Karnow, *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines* (New York, 1989), 376–77.

87. Walden Bello, "Edging toward the Quagmire: The United States and the Philippine Crisis," *World Policy Journal* 3 (1985/6): 29–58; H. W. Brands, *Bound to Empire: The United States and the Philippines* (Oxford, UK, 1992).

Pacific Council), formed in 1966, brought together Australia, Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, South Vietnam, and Thailand. ASPAC’s membership intertwined it with ANZUS, ASEAN, the Asian Parliamentarians Union, the FPDA, and SEATO. No doubt, U.S. officials sought consolations in Southeast Asia wherever they could. But there is no denying ASEAN’s collective pro-U.S. bent, barely concealed by some of its members’ disingenuous professions of neutralism. As the State Department acknowledged, the “bonds between us and the East Asian nations [for their analysis also included South Korea and Japan] have been strengthened by a variety of contacts.” Department officials neglected to mention of course that U.S. assistance had enabled the authoritarian and repressive pro-U.S. governments of the region to seize and hold power, solidifying the anticommunist arc.⁸⁸

U.S. officials were not the only ones who appreciated that the East and Southeast Asian states had woven a complicated security web throughout the region. Malaysian Foreign Minister Ghazali Shafie may have stated it best in the London *Times* in November 1970, when he described how the ASEAN states had crafted a “crisscrossing network” that collectively strengthened them all. He pointed to Malaysia’s joint operations with Thailand, which continued to hunt the tattered bands of Malayan Communist Party fighters along the Malay-Thai border. He mentioned, too, the “security/military arrangements” that Malaysia and Indonesia had established for protecting the Sarawak-Kalimantan border in Borneo. Ghazali even boasted about the FPDA, though he could not have known how far that defense arrangement and *Bersatu Padu* had undermined Russian ambitions in the region.⁸⁹

Most crucially, Zhou Enlai discerned the overall pro-U.S. trajectory of Southeast and East Asia, the crisscrossing economic and security networks that had advanced U.S. empire further into the region. On March 6, 1969, U.S. intelligence officers reported that Zhou had openly expressed his frustration that China now “found itself ‘encircled’ . . . and isolated on most key policy issues.”⁹⁰ Zhou, who was directly responsible for Chinese foreign policy, would later admit to Kissinger that he believed “the institutions for [containing China] in Southeast Asia are more numerous than in any other area in the world.”⁹¹ In other words, the time was ripe for Nixon to subject Chinese leaders to “containment without isolation.” Zhou’s convictions about China’s isolation had already made him

88. “VII. East Asia, A. Overview: Asian Trends and U.S. Policy,” undated (likely December 1968/ January 1969), folder “Chapter 7 (East Asia): Sections A-D,” box 3, LBJ Papers, Administrative history, Department of State, vol. I, chaps. 7–9, LBJL.

89. M. Ghazali Shafie, “Malaysia in South East Asia” in M. Ghazali Shafie, *Malaysia, International Relations: Selected Speeches* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1982), 160–63.

90. CIA, National Intelligence Estimate: Communist China and Asia, March 6, 1969, 5, CIA FOIA Reading Room, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0001085113.pdf, accessed July 14, 2016.

91. Memcon, February 17, 1973, 20, folder “Memcons and Reports (Originals) [TS 1 of 2] (3 of 4),” box 98, NSC Files—HAKOF, CF-Far East, RMNL.

susceptible to Nixon's triangular diplomacy. The Sino-Soviet rivalry that subsequently exploded into armed clashes merely amplified the urgency of détente with the United States.

Historians of Chinese foreign policy have ignored the role of ASEAN's pro-U.S. diplomacy in their attempts to explain senior Chinese leaders' eagerness for détente with the United States. Privileging Chairman Mao Zedong's personal anxieties, they contend that the Sino-Soviet conflict and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution severely undermined China's military and paralyzed its diplomacy. These twin pressures, in Arne Westad's view, made Nixon's visit to China a "true godsend" for Mao. The aging, ailing and politically weakened Chinese leader could then boast that Nixon had "recognized China's centrality" and sought his political wisdom. Mao believed this claim could fend off his upstart colleagues who had been angling to unseat him since the Cultural Revolution.⁹² Yet this analysis does not account for Zhou's perception that the United States and its Southeast Asian allies had encircled China, especially given that he personally negotiated the terms of the Shanghai Communiqué with Kissinger and Nixon. In fact, Zhou was vulnerable to Nixon's triangular diplomacy because Chinese foreign policy faced three crises: the Sino-Soviet rivalry, the Cultural Revolution, and the "wide anticommunist arc" that enclosed the entire South China Sea.

ASEAN'S NEUTRALIZATION POLICY AND THE SHANGHAI COMMUNIQUÉ

Ironically, then, ASEAN leaders' success in limiting Chinese influence and reinforcing U.S. predominance in the region had made Sino-American détente possible. But if Nixon's rapprochement with China disappointed his Southeast Asian allies, it failed to completely shock them. ASEAN leaders' faith in the U.S. security umbrella had been dissolving since at least 1969, when Nixon stated in Guam that, except in the case of formal treaties with the United States, Washington's Asian allies must defend themselves.⁹³ So while ASEAN leaders still encouraged U.S. policymakers to remain committed to Vietnam and the region through the early 1970s, they also started hedging against U.S. retrenchment.⁹⁴ To this latter end, ASEAN leaders undertook diplomatic initiatives to acquire the support of China and the United States (and to a lesser extent, the USSR) for the neutralization of Southeast Asia, for keeping the region "free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers."⁹⁵ In yet another ironic twist, the ASEAN plan to

92. Westad, *Restless Empire*, 366–69; Chen, *Mao's China*, chap. 9.

93. Richard M. Nixon, Informal Remarks in Guam with newsmen, July 25, 1969, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2140>, accessed February 24, 2015.

94. McMahon, *Limits of Empire*, 170–75.

95. 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) Declaration, *Center of International Law*, <http://www.icnl.org/research/library/files/Transnational/zone.pdf>, accessed February 25, 2015.

neutralize Southeast Asia, known as ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality), would also facilitate Sino-U.S. rapprochement, for no less than Zhou would adopt ZOPFAN’s tenets when negotiating the Shanghai Communiqué with Kissinger and Nixon.

Scholars have traditionally downplayed the significance of the ZOPFAN proposal. They contend that ZOPFAN was a Malaysian “pet project” and that the other ASEAN members reluctantly signed the ZOPFAN declaration. The ASEAN leaders were indeed divided over the meaning of neutralization, doubting that neutralization was even feasible given the superpowers’ lasting designs upon, and involvement in, Southeast Asia.⁹⁶ Furthermore, several scholars hold that the ASEAN states, as smaller powers with limited influence, could never win the superpowers’ all-important endorsement of their neutralization proposal, so the ZOPFAN formula “fell on barren ground.”⁹⁷ In like vein, one historian has argued that because the “lengthy memoirs” of Nixon and Kissinger do not mention ASEAN, U.S. leaders must have been “riveted” to the conflict in Indochina and ignored ASEAN’s “diplomatic gyrations.”⁹⁸

As such, the widely held view of scholars remains that ASEAN leaders scrambled to thaw relations with Beijing after Nixon’s July 1971 declaration that he planned to visit China. And it is true that Nixon’s announcement saw most of the ASEAN leaders dilute their once impassioned anti-China stance. Thai leaders, ruing that Nixon had not consulted them on this major policy shift, made friendly overtures to China with a ping-pong team and a trade mission. Marcos also resentfully took steps to normalize relations with the communist giant. In turn, the leaders of Malaysia and Singapore emphasized that they had always been non-aligned (despite their track record) so as to establish trade and diplomatic contacts with China. Only Indonesia proved reluctant to turn in that direction.⁹⁹

Yet a substantially different story hides in plain sight within the transcripts of the historic meetings between Zhou, Kissinger, and Nixon. Revisiting these records while bearing in mind the wide anticommunist arc and its impact upon Zhou’s worldview reveals instead ASEAN’s considerable influence upon the central principles of Sino-U.S. rapprochement. In this, the diplomatic efforts of ASEAN statesmen to promote ZOPFAN—the Malaysians in particular—were crucial. From 1970 through 1971, the new Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak and his colleagues advocated for the principles of ZOPFAN in multiple international forums, believing the heightened visibility of their neutralization proposal would gain international support and catch Beijing’s attention. In April 1970, Ghazali asked the nonaligned nations gathered at Dar es Salaam,

96. McMahon, *Limits of Empire*, 174; Bilveer Singh, *ZOPFAN and the New Security Order in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1992), 58–61; Heiner Hanggi, *ASEAN and the ZOPFAN Concept* (Singapore, 1991), 37–38.

97. Hanggi, *ZOPFAN Concept*, 38; Singh, *ZOPFAN*, 55, 59.

98. McMahon, *Limits of Empire*, 175.

99. McMahon, *Limits of Empire*, 172–75.

Tanzania, to “endorse the neutralization not only of the Indochina area but of the entire region of Southeast Asia, guaranteed by the three major powers,” the United States, USSR, and China. Five months later, Razak requested that all the nations at the nonaligned summit in Lusaka, Zambia, support Malaysia’s proposal for neutralizing Southeast Asia. In October 1970, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tun Ismail addressed the United Nations and called for “neutralization not only of the Indochina area but also of the entire region of Southeast Asia,” again to be “guaranteed by the three superpowers.” The Malaysians were relentless. In January 1971, Razak took his proposal to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Singapore and argued again for neutralization and the “endorsement of the U.S., USSR and China.” Ismail then made the same case at the ASEAN Ministerial Conference in Manila in March 1971. In October, Razak delivered what he hoped was the clincher at the UN General Assembly.¹⁰⁰ The next month, in Kuala Lumpur, Razak pressed other ASEAN members to sign off on the ZOPFAN proposal.¹⁰¹

More than they knew, the Malaysians’ campaign for ZOPFAN and badgering of other ASEAN leaders to support the proposal captured Zhou’s imagination. In fact, Zhou would later tell Kissinger that having learned of ZOPFAN’s principles he soon came to believe they were a “good tendency” for the region. In addition, he shared with Kissinger that the ASEAN leaders (with the exception of the Indonesians) had preempted Nixon’s visit and “asked our opinion” about their plans to “embark on a road of neutrality.”¹⁰² Despite their reservations about ZOPFAN, almost all the ASEAN leaders had peddled the proposal to Beijing.

Though the ASEAN leaders viewed ZOPFAN as a way to cope with U.S. withdrawal from the region, Zhou welcomed the proposal as an unexpected concession from the United States’ allies. From a position of strength that they did not fully appreciate, ASEAN leaders had offered Beijing a way to endure containment without isolation. And as we shall see below, the thrust of Zhou’s discussions with Kissinger and Nixon from 1971 through 1972 signals that the Chinese premier was enamored with the ZOPFAN principles. Chinese records of the Zhou-Kissinger talks in October 1971, for example, show that Zhou even went against the heated objections of Mao to ensure that ZOPFAN’s main ideas were featured in the draft of Shanghai Communiqué.¹⁰³ American accounts of the Zhou-Nixon discussions

100. Singh, *ZOPFAN*, 35–40.

101. Hanngi, *ZOPFAN Concept*, 16; Ghazali Shafie, “Neutralization of South East Asia” in *Malaysia, International Relations*, 171–77. Ghazali’s article originally appeared in an October 1971 issue of the journal *Pacific Community* (known later as *Asia Pacific Community*, an Asian quarterly that ran between 1969 and 1978).

102. Record of Discussion: Henry Kissinger/ Zhou Enlai – June 21, 1972, folder “February 1973 Briefing Book [TS] (1 of 4),” box 98, NSC Files—HAKOF, CF-Far East, RMNL.

103. “Kissinger’s Second Visit to China in October 1971,” trans. Gao Bei, *Xin Zhongguo Waijiao Fengyun* [Main Diplomatic Events of New China], vol. III, 59–70, *Digital National Security Archive* (hereafter DNSA), <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB70/doc21.pdf>, accessed April 13, 2016.



Figure 3: Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak visits President Richard Nixon on October 5, 1971, to discuss Malaysia’s plan to neutralize Southeast Asia. In fact, Razak had already promoted the concept at the UN General Assembly four days earlier, and soon after prevailed upon ASEAN leaders to issue the ZOPFAN declaration. Courtesy of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum.

of February 1972 indicate that Zhou equated the spirit of ZOPFAN with the Shanghai Communiqué’s signature declaration that “neither [the United States nor China] seeks hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region” and would oppose efforts by another power (meaning the USSR) to “establish such hegemony.”¹⁰⁴

104. Record of Discussion: President/ Chou En-Lai—Feb. 22, 1972 and Feb. 24, 1972, folder “February 1973 Briefing Book [TS] (1 of 4),” box 98, NSC Files, HAKOF, CF—Far East, RMNL.

At base, Zhou discerned in ZOPFAN a minor boost to China's status, for it implied that the United States would recognize China as a worthy guarantor of Southeast Asian neutrality, as an equal superpower. Historian Chen Jian has shown that Beijing had always aspired for "recognition as a central part of the world revolution," its "constant aim" was to be seen as an "equal partner" with Moscow.¹⁰⁵ By extension, Zhou must have reasoned that the ZOPFAN principles—once embedded within the Shanghai Communiqué—would publicly shore up China's status as a legitimate great power, one that like the United States' could deign to eschew hegemonic ambitions (despite the reality of China's limited influence beyond Indochina).

American and Chinese records show that even the simple task of phrasing the forswearing of hegemony was a contentious affair. While Kissinger's report to Nixon from October 1971 took no credit for formulating this statement in the draft communiqué, Chinese records maintain that the Americans had coined it and, importantly, that Mao loathed it.¹⁰⁶ Though Mao had been keen to meet Nixon and get Sino-U.S. rapprochement underway, he turned out to be the biggest obstacle to Zhou's and Kissinger's efforts to draft the communiqué in October 1971. Chinese accounts detail how Mao treated Zhou to withering rebukes that the Americans were "all empty talk" about renouncing hegemony. Mao insisted that Zhou craft the communiqué to instead "emphasize revolution, liberating the oppressed nations and peoples in the world." The chairman wanted to excise "empty talks" (sic) from the communiqué because if the United States "did not seek hegemony, how could America expand from 13 states to 50 states?" As Mao exclaimed that the Americans had "tried to expand to the whole world," Zhou deflected the tirade by promising to "revise the draft per the chairman's advice." However, over the next three days while redrafting the communiqué and holding discussions with Kissinger, Zhou and his aide, Xiong Xianghui, contrived to only alter or add other statements to the communiqué, leaving unchanged the ones to which Mao had vehemently objected. Zhou eventually secured Mao's approval of the revised draft, though it is unclear why Mao now appeared to believe that the draft communiqué was "good and had a voice."¹⁰⁷

Having circumvented Mao's objections, Zhou met Nixon four months later with the intention of persuading the American president to accept his particular conflation of neutralizing Southeast Asia with both powers' disavowal of hegemony in the region. On February 22, 1972, the second day of Nixon's visit, Zhou borrowed phrases from ZOPFAN repeatedly, expressing his fervor for neutralizing Southeast Asia until Nixon finally responded that he, too, "would accept the

105. Chen, *Mao's China*, 63.

106. Memorandum from Kissinger to the President, October 26, 1971, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter FRUS), 1969–1976, vol. XVII, China (Washington, DC) available online at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d165>, last accessed on April 13, 2016; "Kissinger's Second Visit to China in October 1971," *Xin Zhongguo Waijiao Fengyun*.

107. "Kissinger's Second Visit to China in October 1971," *Xin Zhongguo Waijiao Fengyun*.

idea [Zhou] referred to as a *neutralized area*” so long as China upheld the “deal” in concert with the United States.¹⁰⁸

The transcript for that day’s talks ends there with Nixon’s assent, ostensibly a product of Zhou’s assertiveness and Nixon’s deference to Zhou. For, despite Nixon’s confidence in the anticommunist arc, he approached Zhou as well as Mao with some trepidation, making it easier for Zhou to advocate for the ZOPFAN principles. After all, Nixon’s director of Central Intelligence as well as the NSC had repeatedly emphasized China’s tremendous politico-military heft, since China possessed the “largest land army in the world” that could “overrun its smaller neighbors in Asia” in addition to a “growing nuclear potential” that unnerved even the Soviets.¹⁰⁹ Kissinger, too, counseled that Nixon must impress the “truly imposing and formidable pair” of Mao and Zhou, and match their “broad philosophic touch” on the “strategic outlines” of world affairs or else risk looking “flaccid” to these “fanatic and pragmatic” Chinese leaders. He warned Nixon that, above all, Mao and Zhou would be “sizing you up” based upon whether “you understand their view [and if] your own policy framework [is] compatible with theirs?”¹¹⁰ In the thick of his discussions with Zhou, Nixon likely calculated that he must concur with the Chinese leader’s determination to neutralize Southeast Asia, both to communicate he was Zhou’s equal in strategic thought as well as to thaw Sino-U.S. relations. At the same time, Nixon would have perceived that the neutralization proposal would enable the United States to retreat from Vietnam while retaining *de facto* hegemony in Southeast Asia due to its entrenched political, military, and economic ties with the ASEAN countries.

On February 24, when Zhou returned to the topic of neutralizing Southeast Asia, Nixon was ready to meet him halfway. Zhou stated that the United States and China must together help the Southeast Asian states “bring about an area of *peace and neutrality*,” the essence of ZOPFAN, and Nixon agreed. Zhou then insisted that these aspirations must feature in their joint communiqué, which would soon be made public, to which Nixon voiced no objections. At this point, merging the ZOPFAN principles with the Shanghai Communiqué, Zhou read aloud from the draft that “neither [China nor the U.S.] should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific

108. Record of Discussion: President/ Chou En-Lai—Feb. 22, 1972 and Feb. 24, 1972, folder “February 1973 Briefing Book [TS] (1 of 4),” box 98, NSC Files, HAKOF, CF—Far East, RMNL, italics added.

109. Richard Helms, DCI Briefing for NSC Meeting: Communist China, August 12, 1969, folder “NSC Meeting (San Clemente) August 14, 1969, Briefings: Korea, China [2 of 3],” Box H-023, NPMS, NSC Institutional (“H”) Files, Meeting Files (1969–74), NSC Meetings; Memorandum, Richard H. Solomon to Kissinger, December 7, 1971, 1, 7, 8, folder “PRC/ Briefing Papers Sent to President, February 1972 [1 of 2],” box 91, NSC Files, HAKOF, CF—Far East, RMNL.

110. Memorandum, Kissinger to Nixon, February 5, 1972, 2, 7, 8, folder “PRC/ Briefing Papers Sent to President, February 1972 [1 of 2],” box 91, National Security Council (NSC) Files, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files (Kissinger Office Files), Country Files—Far East, RMNL.



Figure 4: President Richard Nixon shaking hands with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai amid a crowd at Hung Chiao Airport on February 28, 1972, the final day of his historic trip to China. In the days before this picture was taken, Zhou repeatedly brought up the neutralization of Southeast Asia in discussions with Nixon, drawing from the ZOPFAN concept. Courtesy of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum.

region,” and both affirmed they would oppose others that attempted to “establish such hegemony.”¹¹¹

Four days later, both the American and Chinese governments publicized the Shanghai Communiqué. And when Nixon arrived at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland on the night of February 28, 1972, he called his visit to China a “journey of peace,” explaining that this was why he and the Chinese had agreed to “oppose [the] domination of the Pacific by any one power.”¹¹² In reality, the United States’ remained by far the dominant power in that region. The tortured American withdrawal from Vietnam would remove only the most visible sign of American hegemony in Southeast Asia, leaving the wide anticommunist arc largely intact, tantamount to a U.S. neocolonial system that stretched through most of the region.

Just as important, the salient principles of the Shanghai Communiqué carried the spirit of the ZOPFAN declaration. More than just Zhou lifting choice phrases

111. Record of Discussion: President/ Chou En-Lai—Feb. 22, 1972 and Feb. 24, 1972, folder “February 1973 Briefing Book [TS] (1 of 4),” box 98, NSC Files, HAKOF, CF—Far East, RMNL. Italics added.

112. Nixon, Remarks at Andrews Air Force Base on Returning from the People’s Republic of China, February 28, 1972, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=3756&st=nixon&st1=china>, accessed November 20, 2015.

from ZOPFAN to discuss with Nixon, these parallels represented an ironic coincidence of ASEAN and Chinese agendas. While the deepening U.S.-ASEAN relationship had contained Chinese influence and power, the ASEAN neutralization proposal offered the Chinese leadership an escape from complete isolation. Little wonder, then, that Zhou readily adopted the ZOPFAN principles when he learned of them from the ASEAN leaders or that he labored to persuade Nixon of their value when they finally met face-to-face. The efforts of ASEAN leaders had directly shaped the agendas and actions of the superpowers.

Yet to hear Nixon tell it, to see how photographs captured this first leg of his triangular diplomacy (Nixon shaking hands with Mao on the cover of *Time*; Nixon raising a toast to Zhou on *Newsweek*), one may be tempted to think that only the statesmen of the big powers had brought détente into reality.¹¹³ As mentioned above, major studies of Nixon’s triangular diplomacy have reached similar conclusions. They offer a range of explanations for the American, Chinese, and Soviet leaders’ motivations for reaching détente, usually centered on conservative attempts to preserve the Cold War order against the destabilizing shocks of globalization and the Vietnam War (in the case of the United States) and burgeoning internal dissent (as with the USSR, China, and the United States).

This article offers an alternate perspective, one that contends that the United States achieved hegemony in Southeast Asia despite its failures in Vietnam. By the time of Nixon’s presidency, Soviet and Chinese leaders actually viewed their strategic shortcomings in Southeast Asia vis-à-vis the United States more acutely than U.S. officials fixated with Vietnam. For the Soviets, the recognition that their politico-military reach did not extend beyond Indochina’s borders was intensified by the creation of the FPDA, which though fragile in reality, nevertheless convinced Russian officials that they had been shut out of most of Southeast Asia. The success of Nixon’s efforts to thaw relations with China merely ensured that Soviet leaders became more disposed to triangular diplomacy. Likewise, senior Chinese leaders such as Zhou and Mao had been eager for détente with the United States. As this article shows, Zhou specifically held that the United States and its allies had effectively circumscribed Chinese influence, and that China was in danger of complete isolation from world affairs. After all, ASEAN’s pro-U.S. diplomacy, with willing and generous patrons in presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon, had produced a wide anticommunist arc that enclosed the entire South China Sea. Nixon’s bold execution of triangular diplomacy, therefore, arose from a position of U.S. predominance in the Asia Pacific. Furthermore, ASEAN leaders’ attempts to neutralize the region against the Cold War rivalry directly influenced the Shanghai Communiqué, offering China recognition as an equal superpower to the United States and Zhou a formula for escaping isolation. Absent the roles of the FPDA and ASEAN, the story of Nixon’s triangular diplomacy remains

113. Another example, in addition to Westad’s *Restless Empire* and Chen’s *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, is Evelyn Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961–74: From “Red Menace” to “Tacit Ally”* (Cambridge, UK, 2005).

incomplete, even inaccurate. In this light, certainly, Nixon's exhortation in *Foreign Affairs* to turn our gaze to the "rest of Asia," away from the distortions to analysis created by the Vietnam War, offers a new understanding of this pivotal moment in the intertwined histories of British decolonization, Southeast Asian regionalism, and U.S. empire in the Cold War.

Copyright of Diplomatic History is the property of Oxford University Press / USA and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.