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British Neo-colonialism in Malaya and Singapore, and U.S. Empire in the Pacific

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Chapter 2: British Neo-colonialism in Malaya and Singapore, and U.S. Empire in the Pacific

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On March 23, 1976, Colonel J.C.A. Swynnerton and 22 non-commissioned officers of the British Army vacated the HMS Terror Naval Barracks in Singapore and checked into the Hotel Equatorial. Swynnerton had served in various corners of Britain's shrinking empire, including stints in Nigeria and Kenya in the 1950s as these two countries clamored for colonial rule to end. In Singapore, he was to transfer the Terror Barracks to local control. With that accomplished, he boarded a commercial jet bound for England eight days later. The local newspapers dubbed him the "last British soldier [to] leave Singapore."[1]

This "Brexit" of the late 1970s passed without fanfare. After all, Singapore had gained its independence from Britain some ten years earlier. Yet Swynnerton's actions were doubtlessly significant—they represent the definitive end of Britain's protracted withdrawal from its military installations in Singapore, from its once mighty empire east of Suez. Indeed, Britain's imperial influence had endured in Southeast Asia longer than the other European colonial powers thanks to London's neo-colonial strategies in Singapore and Malaya after 1945, and the efforts of local conservative elites. The French, by contrast, had departed Indochina some twenty years before Swynnerton came to Singapore; the Dutch had quit virtually all their possessions in the Netherlands East Indies even earlier after failing to quell the Indonesian nationalists. Only Britain's tenacious empire would overlap for a considerable time with the ascent of U.S. power in Southeast Asia, profoundly shaping U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the wider Asian region between the 1950s and early 1970s.

This essay places the Vietnam War upon that larger canvas of Southeast and East Asian history by studying the long shadow that Britain's Empire cast over U.S. entanglements across the region. Though historians have studied Anglo-American relations in Cold War Southeast Asia, scholarship on the subject remains piecemeal. There are valuable

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This essay is adapted from material in the author's book, *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

[1] "Why Army meals are as good as those in some Singapore hotels," *The Straits Times*, March 24, 1976; "The Last British Soldier Leaves Singapore Tomorrow," *The Straits Times*, March 30, 1976.

studies of U.S.-British interactions in the early 1960s with respect to the Vietnam conflict or the Indonesia-Malaysia rivalry known as the Confrontation.[2] And there are insightful considerations of U.S. reactions to Britain's pull-out from Singapore from the end of the 1960s.[3] But only one recent study has attempted to analyze Anglo-American relations in the Southeast Asian context from the end of the Pacific War through America's retreat from Vietnam.[4] This essay adopts a similar wide-angle lens to consider two key moments when British and U.S. empires were imbricated in Southeast Asia: The first unfolded between the late 1940s and early 1950s, when British officials in Malaya and Singapore directly influenced the expansion of U.S. commitment to Southeast Asia by contributing to the domino theory's emergence and America's earliest moves to support the French war against the Vietminh. The second moment this essay examines occurred over the 1950s and 1960s, when Britain and its allies in Malaysia[5] undermined Sukarno's left-leaning regime in Indonesia and China's influence in Southeast Asia. Consequently, much of Southeast Asia was on a decidedly pro-U.S. trajectory in the mid-1960s when President Lyndon Johnson Americanized the Vietnam conflict on the premise of rescuing the region from communism. Britain's neo-colonial machinations in Malaya and Singapore were fundamental to the expansion of U.S. empire in this corner of the Pacific once dominated by the European powers.

As World War II ended, British officials began contemplating ways to slow the Empire's descent from the apex of global power and retain its valuable colonial possessions. For, Britain's economy had been drained by the conflict with Nazi Germany, and Japan's initial victories over the colonial powers—including Britain's humiliating loss of Singapore in 1942—had galvanized colonized peoples everywhere against western imperialism. Thereafter, Britain sought to cultivate a "special relationship" with the predominant superpower, the United States; to become intimately involved in the decision-making that

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[2] Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in Southeast Asia, 1961-1965: Britain, the United States and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK?: Britain, the U.S. and the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
[3] Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice between Europe and the World?* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); P.L. Pham, *Ending East of Suez: The British Decision to Withdraw from Malaysia and Singapore, 1964-1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[4] Wen-Qing Ngoei, *Arc of Containment.*
[5] To clarify the change in names from Malaya to Malaysia: The Federation of Malaya, which gained independence from Britain in 1957, refers only to the states of the Malay Peninsula. In 1963, Malaya merged with Singapore as well as Britain's Borneo territories, Sabah and Sarawak, to form Malaysia. In 1965, Singapore was ejected from the federation, though Malaysia would retain its name.

would create and preside over the post-1945 world order. Of course, London hoped that the new U.S.-led order would preserve Britain's empire in some shape or form.[6] In effect, London's policy was neo-colonial.

British neo-colonialism was not unique. All the western powers that possessed colonies in Southeast Asia harbored similar aspirations after 1945. The United States seemed to concede to Philippine nationalism by granting independence to its colony but sustained its influence in Southeast Asia by holding on to vast tracts of Philippine land to host its massive air and naval bases. The Dutch mounted an abortive campaign to recolonize the Netherlands East Indies by force.[7] The French, while fighting against the communist-dominated Vietminh, tried vainly to redirect local nationalist fervor from Ho Chi Minh toward a former Annamese emperor—the so-called "Bao Dai solution"—who was pliant and friendly to France.[8]

London, for its part, wished to maintain substantial influence over Singapore (home to vital British military installations) and Malaya (which produced much of the world's rubber and tin supplies). But in 1948, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), guerrilla fighters in the Malay Peninsula and subversive agents that had infiltrated Singapore's trade unions and Chinese-medium middle schools, revolted against British authority. Britain's cause was not helped by the fact that many of Malaya's ethnic Chinese (who comprised almost 40% of the population) initially revered the mostly Chinese MCP. Indeed, the MCP was somewhat popular across the Malay Peninsula since it had been the backbone of a resistance force during the Japanese occupation.

British leaders, aware that the Vietminh provided inspiration to the MCP, surmised that inoculating Malaya and Singapore against communism was inseparable from ensuring America lent material and political support to France's counterrevolutionary campaign in Indochina. The urgency to lock in U.S. commitment to Southeast Asia only increased in October 1949 when the Chinese communists seized the mainland, fuelling pre-existing

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[6] For more on U.S.-British-Singaporean relations in the 1950s, see S.R. Joey Long, *Safe for Decolonization: The Eisenhower Administration, Britain and Singapore* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2011).
[7] Robert J. McMahon, *Colonialism and the Cold War: The United States and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence, 1945-1949* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981); Frances Gouda and Thijs Brocades Zaalberg, *American Visions of the Netherlands East Indies/ Indonesia: U.S. Foreign Policy and Indonesian Nationalism, 1920-1949* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002).
[8] Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

suspicions among western leaders that Beijing would support Southeast Asia's communists and court the region's millions-strong Chinese diaspora.[9]

For the European powers, collaborating with America to uphold western imperialism in Southeast Asia was not new. In the early twentieth century, because the USSR aided and guided local communists throughout Asia, European officials easily drew America onboard their anti-communist projects in the colonies.[10] Thirty years on, the Chinese communists' victory similarly boosted British leaders' hopes of having their U.S. allies perceive Southeast Asia through their eyes and, thereby, throw America's weight behind the remnants of the colonial order despite U.S. analysts explicitly deploring such an "anti-historical act."[11] Indeed, America's so-called "loss of China" to communism had spurred President Harry Truman to dispatch several fact-finding missions to Asia, eager to learn how America could support its allies against a communist bloc that with the addition of China impinged directly on the wider region. London perceived in these U.S. missions a heaven-sent opportunity. From late 1949 through 1950, three such missions traveled through Southeast Asia, each visiting with British administrators in Malaya and Singapore to seek, above all, British assessments of regional affairs. As Colonel R. Allen Griffin, leader of the second mission, made plain: U.S. officials must "talk with the British if [they] were to understand" Southeast Asia.[12] Like Griffin, Ambassador Philip Jessup who led the first mission, and John Melby, who led the third, were impressed by the British Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia, Malcolm MacDonald, whom they encountered in Malaya and Singapore. Jessup underscored that his report to the State Department on Asian security matched the "British view" he had solicited from MacDonald; Melby described MacDonald as the "most constructive man I have talked with" in Asia.[13]

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[9] Sir William Strang, "Tour in South-East Asia and the Far East," March 17, 1949, CAB (Cabinet Files), 129/33, 11; NSC-51: U.S. Policy toward Southeast Asia, July 1, 1949, U.S. Declassified Documents Online (USDCO) (Gale document no. CK2349354016), 1-4, 5-6. Also see, Ngoei, "The United States and the 'Chinese Problem' of Southeast Asia," *Diplomatic History* 45, no. 2 (2021): 240-252.

[10] Anne L. Foster, *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[11] Memo, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to the Cabinet, November 26, 1949, CAB 129/37, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA); Ngoei, *Arc of Containment,* 47.

[12] Oral history interview with Colonel R. Allen Griffin, conducted by James R. Fuchs, February 15, 1974, 59, Oral History Program, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library (HSTL), last accessed July 9, 2019, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/oral-histories/griffinr.

[13] Memcon, "Oral Report by Ambassador-at-Large Philip C. Jessup upon his Return from the East, April 3, 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (*FRUS*), 1950, vol. 6, *East Asia and the Pacific,* ed. Neal H. Petersen, *et al* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976), 68-76; Letter from Melby to John Davies (Policy Planning Staff, Department of State), August 31, 1950, Melby Papers, box 12, Melby Chronological File 1950 (August 16-31), HSTL.

U.S. officials' willingness to trust their British allies' strategic analyses enabled Britain to directly influence U.S. stakes in Cold War Southeast Asia. Men like Malcolm MacDonald would help implant the principle of Southeast Asia's interconnected insecurity—the logic of the domino theory—in the minds of his U.S. counterparts. As U.S. records of meetings between MacDonald and Jessup, Griffin and Melby demonstrate, American officials allowed MacDonald much room to press his case that the fates of Malaya and Singapore were tied to that of Indochina, Burma and Siam.

MacDonald's genius was in rhetorically intertwining the campaigns of the Vietminh and the MCP with U.S. fears of China expanding southwards into the subregion. This, he did by taking American concerns that the Chinese diaspora of the region would serve as Beijing's fifth column and melding them with American and British memories of Japan's conquest of Southeast Asia.[14] As such, Jessup returned to Washington claiming that the "overseas Chinese communities form one of the most important elements in the strength of the Communists in Asia," that these views were "in accord" with those of "McD" (MacDonald) and British officials in Malaya and Singapore. Jessup even contended that countries with large Chinese populations might as well share "common borders" with an expansionist China.[15]

Griffin, subtly encouraged by MacDonald to tap his underlying racial thinking, read developments in Southeast Asia largely through the perceived threat from China and the Chinese diaspora which he assumed had "primary loyalty" to Beijing. His reports on each Southeast Asian country to the State Department either anticipated China would invade (Burma, Thailand and Indochina), or else the "mother country" would mobilize Chinese diasporic networks to subvert U.S.-friendly governments (British authorities in Malaya and Singapore, Indonesia and, again, Thailand).[16] For Griffin, France's war against the Vietminh was embedded within a broader U.S. vision of Southeast Asia, a region presumably interconnected by its overseas Chinese and susceptible to China's hegemonic designs. Importantly, U.S. records underscore that Griffin's reports prompted Truman's decision in April 1950 to back the French in Indochina. These earliest steps for the United States into the Vietnam quagmire entailed increases of U.S. military aid to France, aid which added to Indochina's guaranteed share of the $36.5 million in U.S. military assistance already set aside

[14] Ngoei, "The Domino Logic of the Darkest Moment: The Fall of Singapore, the Atlantic Echo Chamber and 'Chinese Penetration' in U.S. Cold War Policy toward Southeast Asia," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 21, no. 3 (2014): 215-245.
[15] Memcon, "Oral Report by Ambassador-at-Large Philip C. Jessup upon his Return from the East, 70-71.
[16] Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, 37-39.

for distribution among several countries in the wider region (including Thailand, Japan and Indonesia).[17]

In August 1950, with the Korean War raging, John Melby and his team visited Malaya and Singapore, keen to hear MacDonald's analysis of Asia. For this group of U.S. officials, MacDonald conjured the image of a Chinese "highway to the rest of South East Asia" that stretched from Korea and plunged through Burma, Indochina and Siam toward Malaya. This "route," he stated, would be forged by the "local fifth column" of Southeast Asian communists and "all the [overseas] Chinese community" in the region. He painted a vivid picture of vulnerable Southeast Asian states lined up from north to south, a veritable row of teetering dominoes with Indochina as the "place of attack" (he used this phrase repeatedly) for the communists to undermine western power in the region. In a brilliant rhetorical move, he invoked the visceral memory of the Japanese Empire storming through Southeast Asia, knocking the colonial powers over one by one, a foretaste of what the Chinese communists might do. Indeed, Macdonald shrewdly mentioned Thailand's willingness to accommodate to a northern aggressor, which the Melby team acknowledged was a highly "relevant" reference to the "precedent" of Thai behavior in World War II. And he described Malaya and Singapore as the "great prize" at the southern tip of mainland Southeast Asia, which for the military men in Melby's team was sufficient proof that the Chinese would reprise "the Japs'" "overland invasion of Malaya" in the "last war" to seize Britain's fortress in Singapore.[18]

By October 1950, almost four years before President Dwight Eisenhower would enunciate his "falling domino principle," U.S. intelligence officers had elaborated the insights of the fact-finding missions to Asia into a formative rendition of the domino theory. In the words of these American analysts—reminiscent of those uttered by Malcolm MacDonald—the "fall of Indochina would provide the Communists with a staging area in addition to China for military operations against the rest of Southeast Asia, and this threat might well inspire accommodation in both Thailand and Burma... [meaning that] the already considerable difficulty faced by the British in maintaining security in Malaya would be greatly

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[17] Memo, Rusk to Webb, Budgetary Plans for Fiscal Year 1951 for Assistance for Countries Eligible under Section 303 of the Mutual Defense Assistance Act, April 25, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. 6, *East Asia and the Pacific*, 83-84.

[18] State Department, Report of the Joint MDAP Survey Mission to Southeast Asia—Malaya, undated, 1, 9; U.S. Navy, Joint MDAP Survey Mission in Southeast Asia: Malaya, August 17, 1950, 16, Melby Papers, box 12, Melby Chronological File 1950 (August 1-15), HSTL.

aggravated."[19] Eisenhower's peculiar choice of imagery echoed this. More to the point, U.S. planners had willingly absorbed the specific formulation of Southeast Asia's interconnectedness offered by MacDonald and his colleagues, affirming its racist underpinnings and the vague memories it borrowed from Imperial Japan's southward drive. In this way, vital components of Britain's neo-colonial agenda—its early vision of the domino logic intertwined with its emphasis on supporting France against the Vietminh—became lodged within U.S. strategy toward the wider region.

Over the 1950s and 1960s, British neo-colonialism in Malaya and Singapore continued to shape the larger context of America's evolving empire in Southeast Asia. Though U.S. interventions in Indochina proved ineffective in halting the advance of indigenous communist groups, a wide-angle view of Southeast Asia reveals that the states with the most resources and largest populations in the region were ensconced in the U.S. orbit by the late 1960s. Anti-communist elites in Thailand and the Philippines had already risen to political dominance with U.S. assistance in the 1950s.[20] In Malaya and Singapore, similar factions did so with British support and would play a critical role in undermining the left-leaning Sukarno regime of Indonesia, propelling the world's fifth most populous country to the right of the Cold War divide by the end of 1965.

To be sure, Britain's neo-colonial strategies paralleled France's "Bao Dai solution" and America's alliance with South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem.[21] British officials had also courted the anti-communist nationalists in their former colonies, Malaya and Singapore, intending for these conservative elites to eventually helm their countries and, following independence, remain aligned with London. But unlike the French and U.S. forces in Indochina, British and Commonwealth troops, with their Malayan allies, decimated the MCP guerrillas in the Malay Peninsula by the mid-1950s. There were never more than 5,000 MCP fighters in the first place, which made Britain's task easier. In 1957, Malaya gained its independence, led by Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, a Malay prince who proved

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[19] CIA, "Consequences to the U.S. of Communist Domination of Mainland Southeast Asia," October 13, 1950, 1-2, CIA FOIA Reading Room, https://www.cia.gov.

[20] For U.S.-Philippine relations in the early Cold War see, Nick Cullather, *Illusions of Influence: The Political Economy of United States-Philippine Relations, 1942-1960* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). For U.S.-Thai relations, see Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

[21] For more on U.S. policy toward Diem, see Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

more effective at securing the popular vote than British leaders anticiapted.[22] In 1959, Britain advanced Singapore to a stage in decolonization it named "internal self-government," which entailed electing its first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, and local representatives to administer all aspects of government except for foreign policy and defense, which Britain still controlled. The anti-communist Lee proceeded to crush his left-wing rivals in early 1963 by claiming that their leading lights had endorsed a violent anti-British revolt in Brunei and planned to spread it to Singapore. With these allegations (the evidence was circumstantial at best), Lee justified his use of the repressive internal security tools bequeathed by Britain and detained his opponents for years without due process.[23]

Making friends of former colonies aside, Britain sought to retain control of its strategic resources in Southeast Asia, the most important being the military bases in Singapore that enabled London to still crow its world power status and support SEATO and other U.S. goals in the region.[24] After all, U.S. officials had confided in their British counterparts that Washington prized the Singapore bases in the "over-all defense against Communist expansion [in] SEA."[25] Washington even considered British naval bases in Singapore more vital to U.S. objectives in the region than America's "less desirable peripheral" naval base in the Philippines.[26] Happily for London, the Tunku would formalize the Anglo-Malayan Defense Agreement soon after Malaya's independence, requiring that Britain maintain a sizeable and enduring military presence in Southeast Asia.[27] This requirement meant that Britain could access several of its bases in Malaya and, importantly, must have complete control of its Singapore bases. Doubly fortunate for Britain, then, its close relationship with Lee would guarantee the Singapore bases remained in British hands. Lee had no qualms about this arrangement, for an estimated 150,000 Singaporeans' livelihoods were connected in some way to the British bases (nearly a tenth of the population); in fact, the bases generated at least 20 percent of Singapore's national income into the late 1960s.[28]

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[22] Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, chapter 2.
[23] Matthew Jones, "Creating Malaysia: Singapore security, the Borneo Territories and the contours of British policy, 1961-3," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 28, no. 2 (2000): 85-109.
[24] Inward telegram, Selkirk to Secretary of State for the Colonies, April 24, 1962, DO (Dominions Office) 169/96, TNA.
[25] Incoming Telegram, Baldwin to Secretary of State, October 20, 1961, folder "Malaya and Singapore, 1/61-10/61," box 130, President's Office Files, National Security File—Countries, John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL).
[26] CIA, "Consequences to the US of Communist Domination of Mainland Southeast Asia," October 13, 1950, 5.
[27] "Tunku" is a Malay word for prince. In British records, Abdul Rahman was consistently referred to as "The Tunku," a practice that U.S. records adopted from the 1960s.
[28] Lee Hsien Loong, "Let's Pledge to Continue Building this Exceptional Nation," *Today Online*, March 30, 2015, last accessed July 20, 2019, https://www.todayonline.com/rememberinglky/mr-lee-kuan-yews-state-

For Sukarno, watching warily from Jakarta, Malaya's intimate politico-military ties to Britain, and Britain's continued control of the Singapore bases, proved a British neo-colonial plot against Indonesia was underway. His suspicions were not baseless. From the mid-1950s, Washington and London had become concerned about Sukarno's embrace of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Though not himself a communist, Sukarno wished to exploit the PKI's extensive grassroots networks and repel any challenge from the right-wing elites of the Indonesian military. To U.S. and British leaders, though, Sukarno had made Indonesia increasingly vulnerable to communism. In 1958, the Anglo-American allies launched covert operations to topple Sukarno with the notable support of the Tunku and tactical use of the Singapore bases. (This plot against Sukarno failed badly when troops loyal to the Indonesian leader downed an American pilot.)[29] Sukarno survived, embittered by Malaya's part in the plot, fearful of the threat presented by the Singapore bases, and tacked even further to the left. From the early 1960s, despite America's generous offers of aid to smooth over its turbulent past with Sukarno, he gravitated toward China. Indeed, even though the USSR, too, made overtures to Sukarno, he disliked the Kremlin's pragmatic "peaceful co-existence" with America, enamored instead of the Chinese communists' revolutionary zeal and aggressive anti-imperialism.[30] In this period, Sukarno would coin the term *nekolim* to describe Britain's cozy relationship with its former colonies, Malaya and Singapore, a prime example of the new face of colonialism and imperialism after the Second World War.

One more provocation from Britain, Malaya and Singapore would ignite the Indonesia-Malaysia confrontation (known also as *Konfrontasi*) that began in 1963 and ended a few years later with the Indonesian Army's right-wing coup against Sukarno, the massacre of the PKI, and the new Suharto regime's severing of Indonesia's relationship with China. This provocation was the planned merger of Malaya, Singapore, and two British-controlled Borneo territories, Sabah and Sarawak, to form the Federation of Malaysia in September 1963. On the surface, the creation of Malaysia showed Britain's willingness to liquidate its empire in the region, allowing Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak to formally gain their

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funeral-service-pm-lee-hsien-loong-delivers-eulogy; CIA, "Singapore on the Eve of Lee Kuan Yew's Visit to the U.S.," October 6, 1967, 7, CIA FOIA Reading Room, last accessed November 21, 2017, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79-00927A006000070008-3.pdf.

[29] Audrey R. Kahin and George McT. Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

[30] Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History (*Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018), 85, 87-88.

independence by federating with Malaya.[31] Then again, Lee and his government were determined that even after independence, Britain would be allowed "unrestricted use" of the Singapore bases to meet its military obligations to SEATO and Malaya.[32] For Sukarno and his like-minded colleagues, the formation of Malaysia was intolerable—it would project the malign presence of Britain and the Tunku to the Indonesia border in Borneo. American views of Malaysia stoked Sukarno's paranoia. In April 1963, *The New York Times* described Malaysia as a "great counterweight... to the vague threats of Indonesian expansion from the south."[33]

Thus, Indonesian officials took their case against Malaysia to the UN General Assembly and targeted their message at the newly independent nations of the non-aligned bloc. The Indonesians insisted that Malaysia was not "truly independent" so long as Britain controlled its Singapore bases; that the enlarged federation was a "British neo-colonial plot" to encircle Indonesia.[34] In early 1963, Sukarno pre-empted the scheduled creation of Malaysia later that year by launching *Konfrontasi*, a campaign to "crush Malaysia" by all means available. China, eager to strengthen its ties to the PKI and Indonesia, sympathized with Sukarno, agreeing that Malaysia was indeed a "neo-colonial scheme" concocted by Britain and America.[35] Premier Zhou Enlai even signaled that China would aid the communists of Laos, Indonesia and Vietnam in the contest for Southeast Asia. Beijing would regularly embolden Sukarno by assuring him that China would defend Indonesia against aggression from the Anglo-American powers.[36]

At this time in the early 1960s, with South Vietnam spiralling into instability despite (or, perhaps due to) American involvement, U.S. leaders became concerned that their treaty obligations to SEATO and ANZUS (Australia-New Zealand-U.S. Security Pact) might drag American forces into a major war with Indonesia and possibly even its Chinese patron. On paper, Indonesia looked formidable, with about half a million combat troops and military equipment it had received from China, the United States and the USSR. As *Konfrontasi*

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[31] By agreement with Britain and Malaya, Singapore would move from "internal self-government" to full independence as a part of Malaysia. See Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998).
[32] Inward telegram, Selkirk to Secretary of State for the Colonies, April 24, 1962, DO 169/96.
[33] Seth King, "Malaysian Union: A Potential Giant," *New York Times,* April 5, 1963.
[34] *A Survey on the Controversial Problems of the Establishment of the Federation of Malaysia* (Washington, DC: Information Division of the Embassy of Indonesia, 1963); Soekarno, *Sukarno: An Autobiography as Told to Cindy Adams* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 302-303.
[35] Taomo Zhou, "Ambivalent Alliance: Chinese Policy toward Indonesia, 1960–1965," *China Quarterly* 221 (2015): 215.
[36] Zhou, "China and the Thirtieth of September Movement," *Indonesia* 98 (2014): 33.

unfolded in 1963 and 1964, Sukarno cut communications and trade with Malaysia, authorized guerrilla warfare and subversion in Sabah and Sarawak, and had Indonesian bombing aircraft repeatedly buzz and threaten the Royal Air Force in Singapore. Also, Indonesian forces attacked parts of the Malay peninsula and Singapore's offshore petroleum bunkering station, while Indonesian saboteurs bombed various sites in Singapore. Responding, Britain called on its Australian and New Zealand allies, marshaled more than a quarter of the Royal Navy into action. Some 60,000 British military personnel were mobilized during the conflict, many drawn from Britain's commitments to NATO in Germany.[37]

Behind the attention-grabbing military engagements, but no less important, was the Malaysian diplomatic offensive that destroyed Sukarno's reputation among the non-aligned nations he wanted to win over. Lee Kuan Yew started the ball rolling in April 1962 before Malaysia had come into existence, before Sukarno even declared *Konfrontasi*. In a whirlwind trip, Lee visited Burmese leader Ne Win, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and Marshal Josef Tito of Yugoslavia to convince these major non-aligned leaders that *Konfrontasi* endangered the genuine aspirations of Malaysians to "throw off the last remnants of colonialism." Of course, neither Singapore nor Malaya were spurning British imperialism, and Sukarno's accusations should have carried weight given his stature as a pre-eminent Afro-Asian leader. Yet Lee's diplomatic endeavors met with unexpected success. Indeed, Tito had at first refused to see Lee but eventually, after an hour with Lee, promised to break with Sukarno on the Malaysia issue. Nehru, already friendly with the Tunku, gave Malaysia his blessings through Lee. Ne Win and his advisers were likewise sympathetic to Malaysia's cause. Nasser received the Singaporean contingent in a ceremony with "twelve outriders, horns blazing" (according to a British journalist accompanying Lee) and signed a joint statement expressing Egypt's support for Malaysia.[38]

Two years later, Lee embarked on a similar mission to the African continent. From January through February 1964, he and officials from Sabah and Sarawak travelled to 17 African states. Lee stated the mission's goal in a letter to the British High Commissioner to Singapore: "Once we get [the African leaders] over this antipathy for foreign troops and bases, we can effectively isolate the Indonesians."[39] The Indonesians never attempted a

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[37] Brian Farrell, "End of Empire: From Union to Withdrawal," in *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore from First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal,* ed. Malcolm H. Murfett et al (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 388-90, 392-93.

[38] Ngoei, *Arc of Containment,* 137-41. Here, the author draws from the private papers of British journalist Alex Josey who accompanied Lee on these trips. Josey's notes are in the private papers collections of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

[39] Letter, Lee to Philip Moore, February 12, 1964, FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) 141/14078, TNA.

diplomatic campaign of comparable scale. In any case, goodwill for Sukarno in the region was in short supply. The Malaysians managed to persuade virtually all the leaders they visited to endorse Malaysia or at least mute their criticism of Britain's military presence in Singapore. Many African leaders would condemn Sukarno's belligerence—two even compared him to Hitler! Importantly, the African leaders Lee visited believed that Britain's military role in *Konfrontasi* was merely defensive. None were aware of Britain's clandestine raids into Indonesian Borneo and covert British-Malaysian support for secessionist factions in Indonesia that destabilized the country. Because these maneuvers occurred out of sight, Lee could claim convincingly that Malaysia was the victim. Months later, in October 1964, at a non-aligned conference in Egypt, Afro-Asian delegates emphatically denounced Sukarno and *Konfrontasi.*[40]

Crucially, the Malaysians scored their prime objective in touring Africa: agreements from President Camille Alliale of the Ivory Coast and Prime Minister Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya to support Malaysia's non-permanent membership in the UN Security Council. This, the Malaysians and British believed, would eviscerate Indonesia's allegations of British neo-colonialism and legitimize the new federation in the international community. And it did, when in January 1965, Malaysia officially entered the Security Council over Indonesia's objections. Sukarno, incensed, withdrew Indonesia from the United Nations in futile protest.[41]

The diplomatic isolation of the Sukarno regime unfolded alongside Indonesia's bruising military engagement with the fading British Empire, a low-grade war that nevertheless hollowed out the Indonesian economy. For the right-wing army elites of Indonesia, suspicious of the PKI and Beijing's abetting of Sukarno, *Konfrontasi* was disastrous for other reasons besides. Britain and its allies' ferocious response meant that Indonesia's Army was paying the price for Sukarno's belligerence and the ambitions of China and the PKI. (That said, China never rendered military support to Sukarno despite Britain's repeated attacks.) The Indonesian Army right-wingers, determined to prevent *Konfrontasi* from escalating, tamp down the instability it brought, and stop the communists from inveigling themselves deeper into Indonesian politics, sought to end the Sukarno

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[40] Ngoei, *Arc of Containment,* 141-44; Raffi Gregorian, "CLARET Operations and confrontation, 1964-6," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 11, no. 1 (1991): 46-72; David Easter, "British and Malaysian Covert Support for Rebel Movements in Indonesia during the 'Confrontation,' 1963-66," *Intelligence and National Security* 14, no. 4 (1999): 195-208; Daniel Chua, *U.S.-Singapore Relations, 1965-1975: Strategic Non-Alignment in the Cold War* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2017): 73-74.
[41] Ngoei, *Arc of Containment,* 142-44.

regime. In effect, British neo-colonialism in Malaya and Singapore had shoved Indonesia to the precipice. Now, America's part was vital. Following the Eisenhower administration's failed plot against Sukarno, Washington had changed its approach and, in addition to wooing Sukarno with aid packages, funneled U.S. resources into equipping, training and funding the conservative elements of Indonesia's Army. This strategy persisted through the 1960s, entrenching the U.S.-friendly, anti-communist worldview of the army elites. These elites were primed for a power grab when a small segment of the PKI (including its chairman D.N. Aidit) rightly intuited that an army-led coup against Sukarno was imminent but clumsily played into the army's hands by assassinating six generals suspected to be the core group of its right-wing.[42]

Aidit's gambit, the doomed Thirtieth of September Movement (which occurred on October 1, 1965), sealed the PKI's fate. Major General Suharto of the Indonesian Army stepped to the fore amid the initial confusion (Aidit had also sequestered Sukarno to protect him) and cannily blamed the PKI and China for attempting to subvert Indonesia. He rallied the Indonesian armed forces and the broader public with a call to destroy the PKI, a call amplified by misleading, CIA-supplied propaganda materials and technical equipment which alleged that Beijing was in on the PKI's plot (in fact, Chinese leaders were stunned by Aidit's move). A massacre ensued between 1965 and 1966, as the Army and civilians aroused by the disinformation campaign, their own prejudices and paranoia, slaughtered PKI members, suspected communists, and ethnic Chinese believed to be loyal to Beijing. Upwards of half a million Indonesians were killed. U.S. officials, aware that Indonesia was moving swiftly into the American orbit, helped to conceal the rising body count. Thereafter, Suharto assumed power, sweeping aside Sukarno who was ineffectual without the PKI. In 1967, Suharto broke Indonesia's diplomatic relations with China, leaving the communist powers with only Indochina as their toehold in Southeast Asia.[43]

Indonesia's historic turn, prodded along expediently by U.S. interference, spurred by Britain's endeavors to preserve its power in Southeast Asia, and the machinations of anti-communists in Malaya and Singapore, was part of the larger regional context that enclosed the Vietnam War. Given that by late 1965 much of Southeast Asia—the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia—were firmly anti-communist, there is great

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[42] John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'Etat in Indonesia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), chapters 5 and 6.
[43] Zhou, "China and the Thirtieth of September Movement"; Ngoei, *Arc of Containment,* 146-47; Vincent Bevins, "What the United States did in Indonesia," *The Atlantic,* October 20, 2017.

irony in President Johnson's escalation of the U.S. role in Vietnam. The bloodbaths that flowed from his fateful choice within Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are all the more tragic because America had by then already attained predominance in Southeast Asia.

In effect, British neo-colonialism in Malaya and Singapore from the end of World War II through the late 1960s was mutually constitutive with the growth of U.S. power in the Pacific. Throughout the long overlap of the declining British Empire and the ascendant United States in Southeast Asia, Britain astutely deepened U.S. commitment to Indochina and the broader region with an incipient version of the domino theory and, with Malaysia and Singapore, played a critical role in Indonesia's transformation. Following, U.S. informal empire in Southeast Asia would further enlarge because British leaders, their nation's economic capacity depleted by *Konfrontasi*, at last decided they must relinquish their Singapore bases and pull their military from Southeast Asia. As Britain's withdrawal process dragged into the 1970s, Malaysia and the newly independent Singapore (which had left the federation in 1965) chose the United States as their new patron, avidly supporting U.S. policy in Vietnam and fastening their economies and security to the U.S.-dominated order in the region.[44] In other words, before and while the United States sank into failure in Vietnam, much of Southeast Asia transitioned through a period of shared U.S.-British predominance into American hegemony. Through a wide-angle lens, then, the ill-starred American war in Vietnam seems something of an anomaly for the post-1945 history of U.S.-Southeast Asian relations, an exception that proves the rule.

[44] Ngoei, "A Wide Anti-Communist Arc: Britain, ASEAN and Nixon's Triangular Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 5 (2017): 903-932.