

## [H-Diplo Article Review 778 on “‘A Wide Anticommunist Arc’: Britain, ASEAN, and Nixon’s Triangular Diplomacy.](#)

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Review by **Mattias Fibiger**, Cornell University

**T**he voluminous historiography of superpower diplomacy in the era of détente possesses a blind spot occluding a critical precursor to the turn from confrontation to

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negotiation: the consolidation of anticommunist states in Southeast Asia. So argues Wen-Qing Ngoei in an ambitious essay, "'A Wide Anticommunist Arc': Britain, ASEAN, and Nixon's Triangular Diplomacy," published in *Diplomatic History* in November 2017.

By "wide anticommunist arc" Ngoei means the crescent of noncommunist states stretching from India in the northwest, swooping down through Southeast Asia and Australasia in the south, before bending north through Taiwan and culminating in South Korea and Japan in the northeast. At the arc's core, upon which Ngoei hones his analysis, lay the Western-aligned states of Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore. This itself is a welcome contribution. Archival and linguistic challenges have made it difficult to conduct historical research on the region's recent past. In the field of international history, only a handful of monographs and a smattering of edited collections treat the region as a whole.<sup>[1]</sup> More adopt what might be called a spokes-on-a-wheel approach, examining bilateral relations between, say, the United States and Indonesia, or the United Kingdom and Malaysia.<sup>[2]</sup> And both multilateral and bilateral studies tend to rely overwhelmingly on English-language source material. Historical scholarship on the period after 1965 is especially rare, making the region an outlier in the field. While regional specialists have examined the trajectory of détente in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, none has yet examined Southeast Asia.<sup>[3]</sup> Grounded in sources from the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon libraries; the national archives of the United States, United Kingdom, and Singapore; and the available secondary literature, Ngoei's essay brings a neglected region into the international historiography of the 1960s and 1970s.

Most accounts of the origins of détente and triangular diplomacy focus on structural change at the domestic and global levels. As leaders in Washington, Moscow, and Beijing faced escalating levels of dissent at home, détente presented them with opportunities to burnish their legitimacy and concentrate national resources on domestic challenges.<sup>[4]</sup> Meanwhile, the advent of Soviet-American nuclear parity, the deepening of the Sino-Soviet split, and the "shock" of globalization altered the international balances of power and threat, and détente allowed American, Soviet, and Chinese leaders to accommodate new geopolitical and geoeconomic realities. When they engage with Southeast Asia, these accounts tend to focus exclusively on the war in Indochina. American policymakers, having concluded that the Vietnam War had exhausted the reservoirs of political and economic capital necessary to sustain a worldwide policy of militarized containment, hoped a superpower condominium at the core would radiate outward and engender stability at the periphery, not least in Vietnam.<sup>[5]</sup> Soviet and Chinese leaders, aware of the region's symbolic importance, struggled for preeminence among Indochina's Communist movements. But Moscow and Beijing, anxious to preserve their improving relationships with Washington, leavened their

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aid to clients in Hanoi and Phnom Penh with appeals to pursue negotiated settlements that fell short of those clients' maximalist objectives. [\[6\]](#)

Ngoei broadens the historiographic optic to include Southeast Asia beyond Indochina. He focuses on two phenomena: the Five Power Defense Arrangement (FPDA) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which he argues fashioned the region into something resembling a "U.S. neocolonial system" (904).

The FPDA emerged out of Britain's decision to withdraw its military forces from positions east of the Suez Canal by 1971. The pullback would weaken the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and abrogate the Anglo-Malayan Defense Agreement, which pledged Britain to defend Malaysia and Singapore. To convince their Commonwealth partners in the region that the British pullback did not amount to abandonment, Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Defense Secretary Denis Healey organized a series of conferences between 1968-1971 that produced the FPDA. The FPDA committed the United Kingdom, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand to immediate consultations—but not necessarily military intervention—in the event of an armed attack on any state party to the arrangement. And as a demonstration of his continued commitment to the region's security, Wilson agreed to dispatch a contingent of British forces to participate in joint military exercises, called *Bersatu Padu*, in the spring of 1970. An upset victory in the UK's June 1970 elections by the Conservative Party under Edward Heath, who opposed the complete withdrawal of British forces from Southeast Asia, led *Bersatu Padu* to take on heightened significance. In reality, both the FPDA and *Bersatu Padu* revealed the decline rather than endurance of British power in the region: Ngoei calls the former "Britain's exit strategy from Southeast Asia" (904), and dubs the latter "a pageant starring an empire long gone" (914). But, Ngoei argues, using articles published in *Izvestiya* and *Pravda* as proxies for internal Soviet records, Brezhnev and his Politburo colleagues misperceived the FPDA and *Bersatu Padu* as evidence of continued American hegemony and Soviet weakness in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN did the same for China. Founded in 1967 after two earlier attempts at regional agglomeration foundered on the shoals of ideological and territorial conflict, ASEAN married together five of Southeast Asia's anticommunist states. Generally ruled by authoritarian regimes, these states gravitated toward the American orbit, allowing national leaders to win military and economic aid that they wielded against their domestic opponents, most often leftists but sometimes ethnic Chinese. Though the ASEAN states were less consistent supporters of American interests than Ngoei implies, they could be counted as reliably anticommunist and contributed to a Chinese sense of encirclement and isolation. Ngoei's article, grating against the Mao-centrism that characterizes most studies of Chinese foreign policy in the era, concentrates on the role of Premier Zhou Enlai, whose belief that China confronted a ring of hostile nations led him to favor negotiations with the United States. As Zhou negotiated the terms of Sino-American rapprochement and the

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Shanghai Communiqué, Ngoei argues, he drew upon concepts enshrined by ASEAN leaders in the 1971 ZOPFAN Declaration, which held that Southeast Asia should become a “Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality.” Thus is revealed not only the role of ASEAN’s consolidation in Chinese leaders’ negative evaluation of the international environment at the dawn of the 1970s, but also the ability of small states to shape “the agendas and actions of the superpowers” (931).

But how important was Southeast Asia, really? Ngoei stakes two provocative claims. First, that the FPDA “chilled Soviet leaders’ ambitions for the region and made them amenable to President Richard Nixon’s triangular diplomacy” (907). And second, that “ASEAN leaders’ success in limiting Chinese influence and reinforcing U.S. predominance in the region had made Sino-American détente possible” (924). In other words, “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” (904). Implicit in these arguments is a counterfactual: Absent Southeast Asia’s increasingly pro-Western (or at least anti-communist) orientation, neither détente between the United States and Soviet Union nor rapprochement between the United States and People’s Republic of China would have occurred. No regional stability, no superpower condominium. This is a weighty argument, and it strains its evidentiary ballasts. Would an Indonesia ruled by the PKI (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*), or a Singapore outside the Western orbit, have so altered Nixon’s, General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev’s, or Chairman Mao Zedong’s strategic calculus that any would have decided *against* pursuing détente and triangular diplomacy?

With variables so numerous and time spans so protracted, conclusively adjudicating these counterfactuals is nigh impossible. But likely outcomes are not beyond the reach of historical imagination. Southeast Asia outside Indochina figured so little in Soviet grand strategy, according to most accounts, that it is difficult to imagine Brezhnev choosing the CPM (Communist Party of Malaya) or PKP (*Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas*) over SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty). In any case, détente did not preclude entirely the continuation of Soviet-American competition in the Third World.<sup>[7]</sup> Mao and Zhou Enlai thought more about Southeast Asia than their Soviet counterparts, but would Chinese predominance in the region have altered their sense of encirclement? It seems unlikely. To the west there was still India, to the north the Soviet Union, to the south a Vietnam divided between American occupation and Soviet influence, and to the east Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan—a ring of hostile states even without casting an eye farther south in Southeast Asia. Nor would a Chinese-dominated Southeast Asia have dramatically altered Mao’s domestic political considerations. The Cultural Revolution sowed chaos so great that it eroded the authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), undermined the planned economy, razed the Confucian value system, and discredited Marxism as a political framework for China’s modernization.<sup>[8]</sup> Triumph in Indonesia may have ignited a rally-round-the-flag effect and

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bolstered Mao's prestige for a time, but it would not have so counterbalanced the CCP's internal failings as to obviate the turn toward external rapprochement.

The most plausible scenario for a Communist-dominated Southeast Asia preventing the emergence of superpower negotiations in the 1970s comes from U.S. domestic politics, a realm given little attention in Ngoei's article. It is not difficult to imagine the American public witnessing a cascade of Southeast Asian dominoes and lining up behind a proto-Reagan figure who demanded a more muscular posture in international affairs and rejected negotiations with the Soviet Union and People's Republic as tantamount to surrender in the Cold War. But Nixon himself anticipated that Communist victories in Southeast Asia would inspire isolationism rather than militarism. He told a group of American ambassadors in the region that even a lone Communist victory in Vietnam would lead the American people to "throw up their hands on further active Asian involvement."<sup>[9]</sup> While one can imagine Nixon, who knew well the political utility of anticommunism, recoiling from negotiations for fear of falling victim to red-baiting, one can also envision him refusing to allow regional setbacks to scuttle his global grand design.

In the final analysis, Ngoei deftly weaves together developments in Washington, London, Moscow, Beijing, and the ASEAN capitals, and he skillfully excavates larger continuities in Western power in Southeast Asia. His novel thesis on the origins of triangular diplomacy merits consideration by scholars of American foreign relations, the Cold War, Southeast Asia, and international history.

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## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> See, for example, Robert McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia Since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Michael Hunt and Steven Levine, *Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Ang Cheng Guan, *The Cold War in Southeast Asia: An Interpretive History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018); Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann, ed., *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945-1962*

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[5]

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— Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 231-256.

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[8]

— Odd Arne Westad, “The Great Transformation: China in the Long 1970s,” in Niall Ferguson, Charles Maier, Erez Manela, and Daniel Sargent, eds., *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2010), 65-79.

[9]

— Memorandum of Conversation, Nixon and Ambassadors, July 29, 1969, MemCons-The President’s Asian and European Trip July-August 1969, National Security Council Files, Box 1023, Richard Nixon Presidential Library.