

Britain, SEATO and the Threat of a Regional War in Laos, 1960-63
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The Vietnam war era can be broadly interpreted to include the thirty year period from the end of the Pacific war in 1945 to the fall of Saigon in 1975. While the war itself is the focus of this conference and of an enormous scholarly literature, it is important to place the events of this period in the broader context of the cold war and the simultaneous process of decolonization that was ongoing throughout the so-called Third World. The war in Vietnam played out against a backdrop in which the interests of the US and its allies opposed those of their Communist rivals, the Soviet Union and China, in the attempt to secure spheres of influence in east and southeast Asia. As the French departed Indochina by 1954 and the Netherlands from their East Indian possessions in the 1940s, Britain remained the major European power in the Far East. With its colonies in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaya, and a long history of trade relations in the region, the US tended to look to Britain as the leading Western power in Southeast Asia, until events in Vietnam gradually engaged the US more actively. While Britain maintained a regional presence throughout the 1950s and 60s, and shared the basic anti-communist position of the US, British attitudes and policies differed in significant ways. In this presentation, I hope to show how and why Britain interpreted the regional conflicts in Southeast Asia in a markedly different way from its most important ally. The British did not see the risks to Western security in southeast Asia in quite the same stark cold war terms as the US, particularly the Eisenhower Administration but carrying over in a large degree to the Kennedy and Johnson periods. Most famously, the British resisted repeated US requests for participation in the Vietnam War in the mid 1960s. Nevertheless, this reluctance was rooted in important differences that went back at least a decade earlier. Today I want to focus specifically on the founding of the regional security

body, SEATO, and the subsequent civil war in Laos that threatened to escalate into a regional war in much the same way the war in Vietnam would do a short time later.

Like the United States, post-1945 Britain was concerned by the rise of Communist influence globally and particularly in the Far East. From 1948-57, Britain was engaged in suppressing a Chinese communist guerrilla movement in its valuable territory of Malaya (partially by employing the strategic hamlet system later used in Vietnam). Britain also watched with growing alarm as the Chinese communist party defeated the KMT government, particularly as Britain had substantial economic and business interests in China, as well as an indefensible colonial outpost in Hong Kong. Partly for this reason, Britain took the step of formally recognizing the new Beijing government in December 1949. Although it did not accrue Britain any greater rights from China, it did provide a significant difference in approach than the US, which blocked recognition of the Beijing government by the UN and by itself until 1971.¹ Similarly, the British government through the 1950s tried to contain the impact of the Korean war and the ongoing crises between China and Taiwan over the Formosa Straits.

The Communist victory in China in 1949 and the subsequent Korean War drew US attention to the possibility of communist expansion into South East Asia (later nicknamed the Domino Theory). While fundamentally supporting US efforts to contain Communist expansionism in Europe (through NATO) and the Middle East (through several attempts at linking defense to new treaties), the British government generally wished to avoid an escalation of tension that could propel both countries into a regional or even global war with China. In 1954, the failure of

¹ Victor S. Kaufman, "Chirep: The Anglo-American Dispute over Chinese representation in the United Nations, 1950-1971" English Historical Review, 115 (461), April 2000, p. 355

France to stabilize its colonial presence in Indo China led to the first of two conferences in Geneva, at which Britain led the way towards a political settlement. It would prove to be last occasion before the famous Suez crisis in 1956 in which Britain openly divided with the US over a major policy decision.

The conference held in Geneva in the summer of 1954 was the first meeting of the foreign ministers of the five great powers since the end of world war two. Intended to respond to the aftermath of the Korean war but taken over by the collapsing French position in Vietnam, the meeting was the high point for Britain's veteran foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, soon to replace the aging Winston Churchill as PM. Eden and Churchill wished to establish a new security system to fill the gap left by the departing French, and were concerned by the more bellicose position of the Eisenhower administration, and in particular the Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. In April 1954, Dulles visited London and in conversations with Eden, believed that Britain supported direct military intervention in SE Asia, including the possible use of nuclear weapons. Eden denied any such position, and indeed "the fundamental aim of British policy was to prevent escalation of a regional crisis into a far greater crisis".² Confronting McCarthyite hysteria at home, Dulles could not convince Eden that intervention was worth the risks involved.

Eden and Dulles met next on May 1 at the beginning of the Geneva conference. Both had come around to the idea of a defense pact for southeast Asia but differed markedly on whether to link it to military intervention. The strained personal relationship between Dulles and Eden was very

² Peter Lowe, Contending with Nationalism and Communism: British Policy Towards Southeast Asia 1945-65 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 67.

visible during the conference, and contrasted with the amicable meetings between Eden and his Chinese counterpart, Chou en-lai (who was very publicly snubbed by Dulles, an incident that rankled for nearly 20 years.) Indeed, the whole dynamic of the conference was very odd; Britain and the Soviet Union acted as co-chairs and brought in China in an effort to arrive at a diplomatic solution to SE Asia.

Along with Molotov and Chou –en-Lai, Eden helped to negotiate the Geneva Accords that ended the conference in July 1954. France would withdraw from its former possessions, with a ceasefire put in place in all three territories. Laos and Cambodia would be neutralized, with Vietnam divided at the 17th parallel of latitude pending elections to be held in 1956. The final accords were endorsed by Britain, France, the Soviet Union, China, the DRV, Laos and Cambodia. Neither the State of Vietnam (the South) nor the US would accept the terms of the accords. While papering over some serious issues, the Geneva agreements did secure temporary peace in southeast Asia, and represented the high point of Anthony Eden’s diplomatic career.³

The need to secure the region diplomatically and politically led directly to the creation of SEATO, only two months after the end of the Geneva conference. Modeled on NATO, Britain and the US once again differed over the intent and scope of the organization. Both NATO and SEATO had political as well as military functions. The US wanted SEATO to refer explicitly to Communist subversion in SE Asia, and to include the recently independent nations in the organization. Eden opposed both these ideas on the grounds that they violated the recently negotiated Geneva accords. In the final agreement signed in Manila in September 1954, these provisions were not included and the signatories were the Western powers plus Thailand,

³ Lowe, p. 72.

Pakistan and the Philippines. A secretariat was established in Bangkok the following year. Over the next several years, military meetings were held at the main British headquarters in Singapore over what forces should be committed to SEATO in the event of a war with China, and certainly the possibility of using nuclear weapons was contemplated. But for Britain, the most important priority was the successful independence of Malaya in 1957 and securing a continued role in the Far East. Defense commitments through SEATO were a lower priority. Indeed, James Cable, head of the South East Asia department at the Foreign Office, put it this way: "I would say that the fundamental weakness of SEATO lay in the conflicting, not to say incompatible, motives from which the member governments joined the organization. We (the British), joined to avoid a split with the Americans; the French to preserve the *presence Francaise* in the Far East; the Pakistanis to annoy the Indians, the Thais to meddle in Cambodia", etc.⁴

Nevertheless, SEATO was envisioned as a political organization of solidarity with friendly states, and even held military exercises in Thailand in 1958, attended as well by observers from South Korea, Taiwan, Laos and South Vietnam. According to observers, "a holiday atmosphere prevailed... Afterwards, assembled diplomats travelled approx. 25 miles to the King's Camp where a 'modest' Thai curry was served, followed by fresh fruit served alfresco by 'comely young ladies' belonging to the Thai army service corps."⁵ But the absence of important nations of the region meant that by 1960, SEATO had ceased to have any real significance for most member countries other than to show a common interest in the region. It can be argued though that provided some stability during the transition period to independence of the late 1950s, and

⁴ Lowe, p.91

⁵ Lowe, p.93

also cemented Thailand and the Philippines to the western alliance, which would have significance during the Vietnam War.

It was in the small mountainous kingdom of Laos, however, where the Anglo-American alliance and the SEATO arrangement in general, would have its first true test. Envisioned as a neutral buffer between the Western and Communist states in the Geneva accords, this status was undermined by the US refusal to accept true neutralization, and by North Vietnamese and Chinese support for the indigenous Pathet Lao movement. As a remote nation of only 2 million people and under French protection until 1954, Laos was almost immediately on an inadvertent frontline of the Cold War, which overlay longstanding territorial ambitions from its neighbors. The weak monarchy had to balance between all these interests and Prince Souvanna, the most able politician, was viewed with deep suspicion by the US. By 1960, Laos had gradually descended into a complex three-way civil war, with the neutralist Souvanna caught between the US-supported military and the Vietnamese-Chinese supported Pathet Lao. Britain and the US differed over how to respond to the escalating crisis, and British PM Harold Macmillan was becoming more alarmed that a possible SEATO intervention in Laos might occur. Britain's ambassador in Laos, John Addis, wrote that "there has been an absolutely central and fundamental difference of opinion between the Americans and ourselves on Laotian policy".⁶ Indeed, the British FO saw the civil war as a local issue which could expand into a larger war involving China, whereas the US saw the Laotian war as another cold war by proxy battleground. Britain hoped to resolve the dispute by means of a coalition government of all the main parties.

⁶ Nick White, "Macmillan, Kennedy and the Key West meeting: Its Significance for the Laotian Civil War and Anglo-American relations" in Civil Wars (Vol. 2, no. 2), Summer 1999, p. 37.

The incoming Kennedy Administration seemed to promise a more flexible approach to the multiple issues developing in the Far East than the more hard-line anti-communist Eisenhower administration. The growing possibility of a war in Laos that could escalate into something much larger was indeed the first foreign policy crisis that Kennedy faced. Macmillan hoped to meet Kennedy as soon as possible to forestall a possible intervention in Laos that would mean the employment of both American and British forces and could potentially grow to involve China. Unlike the previous administration, the British hoped that “neutrality” and “non-alignment” did not mean anti-west or pro-communist, and the new Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, seemed to share this view.⁷ However, the deteriorating situation in Laos meant that some kind of Anglo-American agreement would be needed sooner rather than later. On March 21, at a meeting in the White House, Kennedy’s national security team decided that the Laotian government should request SEATO to intervene militarily. This caused consternation in London as it would commit Britain to a war in South east Asia that it was trying to avoid. But to oppose the US openly would also severely damage Anglo-American relations, which MacMillan had been carefully trying to fix since the debacle over Suez five years previously.

The seriousness of the Laotian crisis led to several Cabinet meetings on March 23. In a press conference, Kennedy had refused to deny that US forces were being sent to Laos. The British government was now under severe pressure to respond to the situation, and neither alternative was attractive. Macmillan instructed the British Ambassador in Moscow, Sir Frank Roberts, to urge the Soviets to have the Pathet Lao accept a ceasefire, or it “could mean war no one could

⁷ White, p. 39.

tell how far it would spread”.⁸ In a letter to Kennedy sent the same day, Macmillan urged caution and that if the US chose to intervene it should do so unilaterally and not using SEATO. Macmillan knew full well that unilateral intervention was not what Kennedy wanted. He also stressed the damage to relations with India that would occur if there was a larger western intervention in Laos. To resolve the problem, Kennedy and Macmillan agreed to meet for the first time at Key West on March 26.⁹ This occurred at the same time as a pre-scheduled SEATO foreign ministers’ meeting was beginning in Bangkok.

At their first meeting, the nearly 30 years’ difference in age between the two men was quite apparent and yet they quickly found an easy rapport, to Macmillan’s relief. Over a lunch of “meat sandwiches” (hamburgers), Kennedy presented a SEATO plan to secure the Laotian capital and secure the river crossings. Kennedy said “What do you think of that”, to which Macmillan replied “Not much. It is not on”.¹⁰ The proposed operation would involve 13,000 troops, mostly US and British, since they had the most in the area at short notice. Macmillan felt compelled to agree to planning going ahead, despite his deep reluctance, since he saw a rupture in his relationship with the US to be the most serious danger. Macmillan therefore was taking a dangerous gamble that he could influence Kennedy against this course of action but had agreed in the end to support it. At the simultaneous SEATO meeting in Bangkok, however, no mention of a commitment to intervene was made, only that member countries would take action appropriate to the circumstances.¹¹

Luckily for both countries, a ceasefire in Laos was concluded on May 3, which although not solving the basic problem at least provided a breathing space. The ceasefire was worked out in

⁸ White, p. 43.

⁹ White, p. 45.

¹⁰ Harold Macmillan, Pointing the Way 1959-1961 (Macmillan, 1972), p. 336.

¹¹ White, p. 49.

Moscow, and it is clear now that Khrushchev was eager to not let what he saw as a minor spat in Laos spill over to more important issues such as Berlin. He too had to form a good working relationship with Kennedy.¹² To arrive at permanent settlement, the original co-chairs of the Geneva accords, Britain and the Soviet Union, convened a second Geneva meeting, which after lengthy negotiations led to a coalition government of the three main Laotian factions. In July 1962, the participants in the Geneva conference signed a protocol stipulating neutrality for Laos. Prince Souvanna, widely seen as the most capable of the Laotian leaders, crafted a fragile government in which both leftist and rightist elements continued to plot.¹³ He was overthrown in a right-wing military coup on April 19, 1964. Essentially the Geneva process had failed, and for the subsequent decade, Laos was slowly immersed in the growing war next door in Vietnam, with the Pathet Lao essentially a proxy army for North Vietnam. In 1975, the Pathet Lao achieved victory as Saigon fell, and established a government that remains in place today.

In conclusion, the episode in Laos reflected the larger forces at play throughout the region. Despite all efforts, the tiny kingdom became a prelude to the much larger war playing out in Vietnam but was equally a pawn of both sides in the Cold war. The British government, preoccupied with its own withdrawal from East Asia and trying to counter US efforts to engage in Vietnam, proved unable to prevent the final collapse of the Geneva process that had such high hopes in 1954. Nevertheless, the episode in Laos demonstrated the difficult position Britain found itself in as the key but nevertheless subordinate US ally in the Far East. As Macmillan's actions showed, the British realized they could at best try to influence US policy rather than direct it, and attempt to avoid escalation. Soon after the resolution of the Laos crisis, Britain

¹² Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, Khrushchev's Cold War (Norton, 2006), pp. 394-95.

¹³ Lowe, p. 182.

became engaged in a significant standoff with Indonesia over the incorporation of Britain's Borneo territories into the newly independent state of Malaysia.¹⁴ At the peak of the Confrontation in 1964-65, Britain had 54,000 troops in Singapore and Malaysia, making it Britain's largest overseas military commitment since 1945. For its part, the US took no part in Britain's war in Borneo in order to stay on good terms with Sukarno's Indonesia. In part because of this commitment, Britain resisted Lyndon Johnson's efforts to engage Britain more fully in the Vietnam War, and indeed by 1967 had decided to terminate its large scale military commitment to East Asia.

¹⁴ For the best recent history of Britain and Vietnam, see Sylvia Ellis, Britain, America and the Vietnam War (Praeger, 2004).