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The winds of change

This chapter traces the changing external conditions evolving from the second half of the 1960s that politically distanced Australia from its close engagement with Asia, which was at its deepest in the years 1966 to 1968. The contextual factors occasioning this shift were the British withdrawal from east of Suez; the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 and its consolidation in the early 1970s as the leading regional organisation; the de-escalation and gradual American withdrawal from Vietnam signalled by President Johnson in March 1968; the Nixon Doctrine of 1969 that United States (US) allies in Asia must take up more of the burden of providing for their own security; and the US rapprochement with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1972. These external factors, which were largely beyond Canberra's capacity to control or influence, carried a range of implications for Australia's position in the world.

The results of these changes, which were felt throughout the 1970s and 1980s, were profound. From being an integral part of Southeast Asia's decolonisation process and a core non-communist East Asian country, Australia's position was transformed into a peripheral South Pacific state, looking 'in' at Asia, with its engagement premised increasingly on a transactional economic basis, rather than the deeper political and normative ties of responsibility and solidarity evident from 1944 through to the late 1960s. This historical trajectory explains Canberra's periodic strategies and initiatives since the 1980s to again 'deepen' Australia's engagement with Asia.

British withdrawal from east of Suez

The withdrawal by 1971 of most British military forces and concomitant strategic influence from Asia was the logical outcome of the postwar decolonisation process. It marked Britain's diminution from global empire to a European power. The British decision to withdraw from east of Suez followed a series of defence expenditure reviews and was prompted by the sterling crisis of 1966–67.¹ Formally announced by the first Wilson Labour Government (1964–70) in 1967, the withdrawal decision was the result of Britain's deteriorating financial situation and a major Defence Expenditure Review undertaken in 1965. An Australian assessment of Britain's strategic position in December of that year noted that the 'problem stems primarily from the economic position of the country'. The British Government was 'determined to limit Defence expenditure' and 'this has brought about a conflict of requirements'.² These tensions were played out between the United Kingdom (UK) Chiefs of Staff, who believed British forces were overcommitted around the world and wished 'to avoid overseas commitments with insufficient resources to implement them effectively'; and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, who were resolved to limit defence expenditure unconditionally to a figure determined on fiscal rather than on strategic grounds.³ There was 'little doubt in the UK that the only area in which [defence] savings of a substantial nature are likely to accrue lies in the area East of Suez', with a relinquishing of the Singapore base forecast for 1970.⁴

The conclusions of Britain's 1965 Defence Expenditure Review were alarming for Australia. For Canberra, the retention of British forces in Southeast Asia was important for both Cold War reasons and for internal stability in the ANZAM (Australia–New Zealand–Malaya Agreement) area. In briefing notes prepared for the visit of Averell Harriman,

1 See Jeffrey Pickering, *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez: The Politics of Retrenchment* (Basingstoke, UK: MacMillan; and New York: St Martin's Press, 1998); Christopher J Bartlett, *The Long Retreat: A Short History of British Defence Policy, 1945–1970* (London and Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1972); David McCourt, 'What was Britain's "East of Suez Role"? Reassessing the Withdrawal, 1964–1968', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 20, no. 3 (2009): 453–72.

2 Covering letter to 'United Kingdom Review of Defence Policy: Implications for Australia', from Air Vice Marshal GC Hartnell to Sir Edwin Hicks, Secretary, Department of Defence, dated 23 December 1965, National Archives of Australia (NAA) A1838/682/4, Part 7.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

the Johnson administration's Ambassador at Large, the Department of External Affairs (DEA) argued in January 1966 that maintaining the British presence was essential because a

United Kingdom withdrawal in the foreseeable future would be a blow to American and Australian concepts that a substantial Western presence in Asia is needed to provide counter-vailing power and sustain the national independence of the South East Asian countries against China.⁵

Further, that:

In our view the British and Commonwealth presence in its current form—bases, forces, commerce, diplomacy—is a great stabilising influence in the Malaysia and Singaporean area. This presence is a cementing force in a delicate communal structure and we believe the main racial groupings accept it and want it. The weakening or disappearance of this presence could bring unrest, uncertainty and even new orientations. The Malays could look to Indonesia for protection against the Chinese. The Chinese throughout the region (Malaya, Sarawak, Sabah) could look to Singapore, which, in turn, could look towards Peking.⁶

The initial Cabinet decision made by the Wilson Government in April 1967 was less dramatic than the assessment and recommendations made in the 1965 Defence Expenditure Review. The intention was to reduce British forces in Malaysia and Singapore by half by 1971 and then to progressively withdraw all forces from Asia (except for Hong Kong), by 1975 or 1976. Despite the slight softening of its withdrawal plans, London was acutely aware of the dismay this would cause in Washington and among the non-communist Asian states, but particularly the severe blow this would be to Australia: that 'we are already planning for a virtually total withdrawal from South East Asia' while the Australians 'are still heavily engaged in Vietnam'.⁷

5 'Talks with Governor Harriman: Background Notes for use by Ministers in Presenting Australia's Position in Relation to the Security Problems of the Region', 9 January 1966, NAA A1838/TS691/3, Part 6.

6 Ibid.; see also 'Strategic Basis of Australia Defence Policy—1971', 19 May 1971, NAA A1209/1971/9495.

7 'Defence Expenditure Studies', Brief for Prime Minister, 3 April 1967, The National Archives, UK (TNA) Prime Minister's Office Records (PREM) 13/1384.

As soon as the British Cabinet decision was clear, Australia mobilised its diplomatic resources to oppose or at least slow down the UK withdrawal from Southeast Asia. This was based on the rationale that British forces should be retained because of the need to ‘maintain stability in the region’; to ‘discourage foreign but particularly Indonesian aggression against the Malaysian area’; to ‘maintain the existing basis for [the] Australian and New Zealand forward defence posture’; to ‘assist in maintaining the outward credibility of SEATO [South East Asia Treaty Organization]’; and to continue to ‘provide visible support of the United States political and military policies in South East Asia’.⁸ Prime Minister Holt was soon in London. In a meeting with Wilson on 13 June 1967, the Australian prime minister gave an account of the Cold War strategic context in East Asia. Holt said:

Australia’s real concern was the long-term implications for the future security pattern of the region. Taking an arc round the mainland from Japan, through Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, round to Malaysia and Singapore, and including Australia and New Zealand, they were bound to note that the only part of the arc where there no American military commitment was in Malaysia and Singapore. The United States Government had always regarded this as a Commonwealth—and indeed primarily a British—responsibility.⁹

Any unequivocal statement of British withdrawal by the mid-1970s ‘would have a shattering effect on Commonwealth relations in the area, on Australia and New Zealand in particular and generally throughout the Far East’.¹⁰ However, the economic imperatives for a British withdrawal only intensified with the Wilson Government’s weak fiscal position, budget and trade deficits, and the sterling crisis.

Despite strong representations by Canberra and Washington, on what became known as ‘Black Tuesday’ in the British Ministry of Defence, 16 January 1968, the timetable for complete British withdrawal from Asia (with the exception of Hong Kong) was brought forward

8 ‘Britain East of Suez’, Department of Defence Brief, May 1967, NAA A4940/C4279.

9 ‘Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of Australia at 10 Downing Street at 10.45 a.m. on Tuesday, June 13, 1967’, 13 June 1967, TNA Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 46/56.

10 *Ibid.*

to 31 March 1971.¹¹ This latest British position also abandoned an undertaking made in the July 1967 UK Defence White Paper that an unspecified ‘special military capability’ would be maintained in Asia, but ‘no provision for the area was now in mind other than some possible drawing upon a general capability located in Europe’.¹² In visiting Australia on 12 January 1968 to explain the change of policy, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs George Thomson met with Gorton, Hasluck and other senior Australian ministers.¹³ Thomson was unequivocal: ‘what he was saying was registering the end of an era and the end of British power on a decisive global scale’.¹⁴ The UK record of the meeting indicates that Gorton and Hasluck ‘expressed great dismay’; with Gorton saying that Australia could not accept the decision, while recognising that ‘the British Government had to do what was dictated by British interests’.¹⁵ It was not only Australia that felt the gravity of the decision. The retrenchment of British global power was announced by Prime Minister Harold Wilson on 17 January to a mostly sombre House of Commons punctuated by a few ‘cheers from the Labour left wing’ and ‘countered by indignant shouts from the Conservative benches’.¹⁶

What is striking about Australian policy discourse around the accelerated British withdrawal decision in 1968 is the lack of confidence expressed that Canberra could or should take over residual British responsibilities in the ANZAM area. This is in stark contrast to earlier Australian claims in the late 1940s and 1950s of a special responsibility for the postwar Southwest Pacific area on behalf of the British Commonwealth, and that Australia should take on an important, even leading, role in Southeast Asian affairs. For example, on 7 February 1968, Hasluck said to the Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik at a meeting in Jakarta ‘that Australia could not possibly take over the place of the British; we did

11 ‘Cabinet Minute, Canberra, 11th January, 1968, Decision No. 4, Without Memorandum—British Defence Policy’, 11 January 1968, NAA A5871, Vol. 1; Pickering, *Britain’s Withdrawal from East of Suez*, 174; Phillip Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez 1947–1968* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 325.

12 ‘Cabinet Minute, Canberra, 11th January, 1968, Decision No. 4, Without Memorandum—British Defence Policy’, 11 January 1968, NAA A5871, Vol. 1.

13 The UK Minister of State for Foreign Affairs is a junior ministerial position under the Cabinet-level Foreign Secretary.

14 ‘Defence in the Far East, Record of Discussions between [UK] Secretary of State [Mr George Thomson] and Australian Ministers in Canberra on 12 January, 1968’, TNA FCO 24/91.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Australian High Commissioner London (Downer) to Department of External Affairs (DEA) Canberra (for Gorton), 17 January 1968, NAA A1209/1969/9036, Part 2.

not have Britain's special historical relationship with or obligations to Malaysia and Singapore; nor was it within our capacity'.¹⁷ Along similar lines, Defence Minister Allen Fairhall said in Parliament on 2 May that '[n]obody imagines that Australia could, or should, take over the present British role or commitments in Malaysia/Singapore. These grew out of Britain's position as a colonial power'.¹⁸

This change of Australian attitude—from Commonwealth responsibility to a more limited conception of the national interest—in the wake of the British withdrawal decision was quickly noted in Malaysia and Singapore. The Australian High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur reported that the previous 'sentimental view that Australia would be ready on [the] basis of past association, to accept unilateral commitment to [the] "automatic" defence of Malaysia' had been replaced by the understanding that 'Australia's future defence undertakings will be based on calculations of national interest in light of requirements of regional situation'.¹⁹ From Singapore, it was reported that while 'Lee and his Ministers said categorically that they want Australia to stay in Singapore and Malaysia', they also

understand that Australia cannot be expected to come in to fill the place left by the British, but they consider that our continued presence and co-operation will in itself help to discourage undesirable elements from trying to fill the vacuum. The confidence engendered by some Australian presence is in Lee Kuan Yew's view a major contribution to maintaining the economic stability and progress of Singapore. If confidence is lost, he said, people will take capital out of Singapore and will not invest in the new industry.²⁰

Lee also thought that a weak Malaysia and Singapore might also tempt Indonesia to try and expand its influence, and thus it was desirable that some foreign military presence be maintained.²¹

17 'Record of Discussion between Mr Malik (Indonesian Foreign Minister) and Mr Hasluck, Djakarta, 7th February, 1968', NAA A4359/221/4/31, Part 1.

18 'Statement on Defence by The Hon. Allen Fairhall, M.P., Minister for Defence, House of Representatives – 2nd May 1968', in NAA A1209/1968/8364.

19 Australian High Commission Kuala Lumpur to DEA Canberra, 21 February 1968, NAA A1209/1969/9036, Part 3.

20 Australian High Commission Singapore (from Hasluck) to DEA Canberra, 3 February 1968, NAA A1209/1969/9036, Part 3.

21 Ibid.

These statements from Malaysia and Singapore provide a strong indication of the evolution during the late 1960s of Australia's changing attitude towards the Commonwealth countries of Southeast Asia, from the claims of responsibility evident in the Chifley and Menzies eras, to a narrower, more interest-based outlook. This was reinforced by the establishment of ASEAN in 1967, discussed in the following section, which signalled a postcolonial and more cultural definition of region that excluded Australia. This form of regional consciousness had been developing throughout the 1960s, and by late in the decade had become more salient for Malaysia than Commonwealth sentiments.

Gorton reinforced this change in Australia's disposition in a meeting with Wilson at 10 Downing Street on 7 January 1969. Gorton said that he

believed most Australians were disinterested in the Commonwealth as such. They were far from disinterested in Britain, to which the attitude of Australians would long—he believed for always—be unique in quality. The same was to some extent true of the other 'old' Commonwealth countries. But in regard to the 'new' Commonwealth Australia's attitude was essentially bilateral and regional.²²

Gorton's statements here reflect the 'new' Australian nationalism attributed to him by commentators of the time.²³ Britain's efforts throughout the 1960s to join the European Economic Community (EEC) at the expense of the imperial preference system, in combination with postwar changes to the demographic composition of Australian society, had eroded the traditional view of the country as a 'loyal outpost of British culture and British civilisation'.²⁴ International norms of anti-racism and postcolonial nationalism that accompanied the rapid decolonisation of the 1950s and 1960s also exerted 'moral pressure on the White Australia policy',²⁵ which was completely dismantled in the early 1970s. These economic, social and normative changes ushered in a more independent sense of Australian national identity.

22 'Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister of Australia at Luncheon at No. 10 Downing Street at 1.15 p.m. on Tuesday, January 7, 1969', TNA FCO 24/384.

23 Stuart Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace: The Demise of the Imperial Ideal* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 256–57.

24 Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace*, 2.

25 James Curran and Stuart Ward, *The Unknown Nation: Australia after Empire* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010), 15.

This moving away from a special relationship with the Commonwealth is also pointedly evident in negotiations between Australia, Singapore and Malaysia over the 1971 Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). In these talks, Australia was concerned to demonstrate that its approach was now part of a balanced regional strategy rather than a Commonwealth responsibility.²⁶ Australia's language and position in negotiating the FPDA are markedly different to its earlier claims of Commonwealth responsibility surrounding the 1955 deployment of forces to the Commonwealth Strategic Reserve in Malaya. Any Australian force deployments related to the FPDA would now be 'a contribution to wider regional security in relation to communist pressures'.²⁷ Australian forces based in Malaysia and Singapore would also be available in support of SEATO obligations to Thailand.²⁸

Similar to the troop commitment to Borneo during Confrontation, Australian deployments under the FPDA were also tacitly backed by the ANZUS (Australia–New Zealand–United States) Treaty, with private assurances reportedly given to Gorton by President Nixon in this regard.²⁹ This assurance did not apply, however, to any internal security contingency stemming from interethnic tensions in Malaysia or Singapore. In this regard, Daniel Chua notes Australia's increasing reluctance to move forward with post-AMDA (Anglo–Malayan Defence Agreement) arrangements after the 'May 13 incident', in which approximately 200 people were killed in Sino-Malay race riots in Kuala Lumpur after the 1969 general election.³⁰ Additionally, Australian deployments could not appear to be directed against other powers, particularly the Philippines (over the disputed territory in Sabah) and Indonesia. Canberra made it clear that it was

26 'Anglo/Malaysian Defence Agreement: Australian Association', April 1969, NAA A1838/TS696/1, Part 18; see also Andrea Benvenuti and Moreen Dee, 'The Five Power Defence Arrangements and the Reappraisal of the British and Australian Policy Interests in Southeast Asia, 1970–75', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2010): 103, 111.

27 'Five Power Conference—June 1969', Cabinet Submission No. 622, 11 June 1969, NAA A5868/622.

28 DEA Canberra to Australian Embassy Washington, DC, 19 February 1968, NAA A4359/221/4/31, Part 1.

29 'Australian Prime Minister's Visit to Washington', UK High Commission Canberra to FCO London, 16 May 1969, TNA FCO 24/398.

30 Daniel Wei Boon Chua, *US–Singapore Relations, 1967–1975: Strategic Non-Alignment in the Cold War* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), 200.

not stepping into British shoes and Australian forces will not fill the role played in the past by British forces. With the British departure the primary and direct responsibility for the defence of Malaysia and Singapore will rest not with any outside forces but with the two Governments concerned.³¹

The FPDA entered into effect on 1 November 1971 as an undertaking to consult in the event “of any form of armed attack externally organised or supported, or the threat of such attack against Malaysia or Singapore”.³²

The ANZAM arrangement was still technically in place at the close of the 1960s. The effect of the British withdrawal was its replacement in 1971 by a looser ‘tripartite agreement’ between the UK, Australia and New Zealand ‘to be known informally as ANZUK’. ANZUK would be ‘almost exclusively consultative’ and, unlike ANZAM, it would not have an integral role in the defence planning of the countries concerned.³³ The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) summarised in 1971 the causes of the decline in the Anglo–Australian ‘special relationship’ in four factors: ‘a natural divergence of interests, Australia turning to South East Asia and the Pacific, and the United Kingdom turning inward and to Europe’; the ‘now almost certain British entry into the EEC on terms that did not appear to take Australia as fully into account as it might have done’; that the colonial ‘son has grown up and become somewhat assertive; and the mother a little resentful at her diminished responsibility and authority’; and finally, and most relevant for the argument advanced here, ‘the diminished significance of the Commonwealth, at least as a political entity, and the deathpangs of Britain’s imperial heyday’.³⁴ The end of British decolonisation in the Southeast Asian region removed a central tenet of Australia’s responsibilities in Southeast Asia, clearing the way for a more instrumental conception of Australia’s regional interests from the late 1960s.

31 ‘Five Power Conference—June 1969’, Cabinet Submission No. 622, 11 June 1969, NAA A5868/622.

32 Cited in ‘Statement by the Minister for Defence (the Honourable David Fairbairn, D.F.C., M.P.)’, 1 November 1971, NAA A1209/1969/9036, Part 34.

33 ‘British Relations with Australia and New Zealand after 1971’, FCO Planning Committee, 8 June 1970, TNA FCO 24/621.

34 ‘Anglo–Australian Relations: Prospects and Initiatives’, Policy Planning Paper, Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Canberra, 3 December 1971, in TNA FCO 24/1047.

ASEAN and Southeast Asian regional identity

The formation of ASEAN in 1967, excluding Australia and New Zealand, and its subsequent consolidation as the leading regional organisation, surpassing the Asian and Pacific Council (ASPAC), is another crucial factor in Australia's political distancing from Asia. The Foreign Ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines inaugurated ASEAN at Bangsaen, near Bangkok, on 8 August 1967.³⁵ ASEAN was partially the fruition of earlier, stillborn attempts at regional organisation in the form of the 1961 Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) (Thailand, the Philippines and Malaya) and the 1963 pan-Malay Maphilindo or Greater Malayan Confederation (comprised of Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia).

Each of these organisations carried fatal flaws in the regional context of the early 1960s. With two countries as members of SEATO and a third with British Commonwealth forces on its territory, ASA was unpalatable to Sukarno's Indonesia and neutralist Burma, Cambodia and Laos. The fledgling organisation was then rendered inoperable in 1963, when the Philippines broke off relations with newly formed Malaysia over the Sabah territorial dispute in north Borneo.³⁶ The cause of pan-Malay solidarity was even shorter lived with Indonesia's 1963–66 *Konfrontasi* of the expansion of the Federation of Malaya to the north Borneo territories. The rationale for Maphilindo was also clearly unpalatable to Chinese-majority Singapore and raised concerns for Thailand's hold over its Muslim and ethnically Malay southern provinces.³⁷ What these initiatives do indicate, however, are pressures building throughout the 1960s toward a postcolonial regional identity based on cultural expressions of 'Asianness' to overcome other divisions and antipathies. By the end of the 1960s, this form of regional consciousness had become more salient for Southeast Asian countries than Commonwealth sentiment in the cases of Malaysia and Singapore, and the non-communist solidarity of ASPAC, both of which more naturally included Australia.

35 'Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)', DEA Canberra to All Posts, 5 September 1967, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 3.

36 'Association of South-East Asia (ASA)', 1964, NAA A1838/3004/13/17, Part 4; Australian High Commission Wellington to DEA Canberra, 25 March 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 15.

37 'Regionalism in South-East Asia', 1967, NAA A1838/3004/13/17, Part 5; Australian High Commission Wellington to DFA Canberra, 25 March 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 15.

By early 1967, regional conditions in Southeast Asia were becoming favourable for a more cohesive regional organisation. Australia's DEA attributed this to the removal of the Sukarno regime in Indonesia and the end of Confrontation; the realisation that the US commitment to Indochina 'offers the rest of South-East Asia an alternative to eventual Chinese domination, provided a degree of regional unity can be forged'; the establishment of the Manila-headquartered Asian Development Bank in 1966; and the successful example of ASPAC, which had stimulated further thinking on regionalism more specifically in Southeast Asia.³⁸ Political elites in Bangkok, Manila and Kuala Lumpur were also acutely aware of the need to bring Indonesia into an inclusive regional system, while understanding that Jakarta would only do so on the basis that it would be 'primus inter pares in any organisation'.³⁹ For its part, the new Suharto regime did not think ASA, Maphilindo or ASPAC were suitable candidates to advance regional organisation with Indonesia's involvement. Australia assessed that Indonesia would want to be seen as initiating any new organisation, 'which would replace, and combine some of the features of, both Maphilindo and ASA'.⁴⁰

Soundings were made by Indonesia in April 1967 'to hold a conference of South-East Asian nations on regional cooperation in the "socio-economic and cultural field" within three months'.⁴¹ What is interesting in terms of the historical trajectory traced in this book is that Australia's decision not to actively seek membership in ASEAN was based largely on transactional grounds, which were deemed to outweigh the considerable political benefits of membership. Canberra initially assessed that it could count on the support of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines should it choose to press for ASEAN membership. Politically, such membership would allow for a closer association with Indonesia and ensure that the expansion of Jakarta's influence 'takes place in an orderly and peaceful fashion'. It was also argued that 'Australian participation in ASEAN would enable' Canberra to exert 'a discreet moderating role and provide scope for trying to ensure that the initiatives and energies of ASEAN are directed into positive and progressive channels'.⁴²

38 'Regionalism in South-East Asia', 1967, NAA A1838/3004/13/17, Part 5.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 'South-East Asian Regional Cooperation', New Zealand (NZ) Legation Djakarta to Secretary External Affairs Wellington, 2 May 1967, in NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 1.

42 DEA Memorandum (Joseph to Osborn), 10 August 1967, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 3.

The balance between a political and economic focus for the new organisation remained unclear in 1967, however. Australian policymakers were also concerned that if ASEAN moved in the direction of a common market, customs union or free trade area, this would be a challenge to Australia's agricultural and industry protection and unacceptable to the departments of Treasury and Trade. Doubts were raised as to how genuine Australia's participation could be under these circumstances. Then if Australia 'failed to pull its weight' or tried to avoid commitments other members had entered into, it 'would rapidly become un-Asian' and its membership in ASEAN would be an irritant rather than a benefit in Canberra's regional relations.⁴³ Policy debates in Australia over the wisdom of seeking ASEAN membership were largely academic, as it turned out. Indonesia was firm as to the core membership of the organisation, which would consist only of Southeast Asian states of similar economic development. This was not intended to rule Australia out specifically, but to also exclude Japan and India—indeed, any larger players that might challenge Indonesian influence in the new organisation.⁴⁴

From the perspective of its original members, potential expansion of ASEAN membership was thus limited only to Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. This suggests a coherent vision of regional identity that now excluded Australia had begun to be formed by Southeast Asian political elites. In October 1967, Pablo Pena, the Philippines' Assistant Secretary for Foreign Affairs, said to the Australian Ambassador to Manila that 'there was a very important difference between ASEAN and ASPAC'. Whereas ASPAC was a looser organisation that did not require participation of all members in all undertakings, ASEAN was conceived as 'a smaller, more homogenous grouping' requiring unanimous decisions and participation.⁴⁵ In response to calls in 1968 by Whitlam from Opposition that Australia should join ASEAN, Adam Malik, Indonesia's Foreign Minister, said that 'Australia and New Zealand could indeed not be made into Asian nations'.⁴⁶ Other states with interests in the area such

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.; also 'Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)', DEA Canberra to All Posts, 5 September 1967, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 3; 'Membership of ASEAN' (text of telegram from NZ High Commissioner Singapore to Wellington regarding ASEAN membership), in DFA Canberra to Kuala Lumpur, Djakarta, Singapore, Manila and Bangkok, 27 September 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 18.

45 'F.R. Dalrymple, Australian Embassy, Manila, Record of Conversation with Ambassador Pablo Pena, Assistant Secretary for Political Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs', 11 October 1967, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 4.

46 Australian Embassy Djakarta to DEA Canberra, 9 January 1968, NAA A1838/541/1/6.

as Pakistan, India and Ceylon, Japan and South Korea, and Australia and New Zealand, might be added later as an outer tier after the nucleus of the organisation had proven itself viable.⁴⁷ In the short term, however, Malik stated that Jakarta 'was primarily interested in co-operation with Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines'. For other countries, there was 'no need or opportunity for anything but good bilateral relationships'.⁴⁸

In December 1969, Malik said again that 'Indonesia would like to see all countries in South East Asia join ASEAN', but it 'was unlikely that ASEAN would be extended to include Australia and New Zealand'.⁴⁹ While not 'banning' Australia and New Zealand from ever becoming members, Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman made the point also in December 1969 that ASEAN was now the vehicle for 'solidarity for the region'.⁵⁰ It is clear by the end of the 1960s that the previous forms of solidarity that had integrated Australia with the region—Commonwealth responsibilities and non-communist ties—had eroded or been superseded, pushing Australia to the margins of regional organisation. A consequence of this, as noted by Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman in December 1967, was that, for its members, ASEAN was likely to become the premier regional organisation and 'the degree of attention' given 'to the work of ASPAC' would necessarily be diminished.⁵¹

The implications of the formation of ASEAN do not appear to have been well understood by Canberra until 1972, however. For example, in May 1969 the short-lived Coalition Minister for External Affairs, Gordon Freeth, wrote that the Sabah dispute greatly weakened the potential of ASEAN, while ASPAC has continued to grow in importance.⁵² In a meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kuala Lumpur in February 1970, Australian officials seemed perplexed that stronger indications of Canberra's acceptability to join ASEAN had not been received, especially from Malaysia and Thailand. Zainal Sulong, Acting

47 'South East Asian Regional Co-operation', Australian Embassy Djakarta to Secretary DEA Canberra, 13 May 1967, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 1.

48 DEA Memorandum (Joseph to Osborn), 10 August 1967, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 3.

49 'ASEAN', Australian High Commission Kuala Lumpur to DEA Canberra, 16 December 1969, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 11.

50 'ASEAN Membership—Australia and New Zealand', Australian High Commission Kuala Lumpur to DEA Canberra, 29 December 1969, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 11.

51 Australian Embassy Bangkok to DEA Canberra, 14 December 1967, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 3.

52 'Proposal to Establish an Economic Co-operation Centre', Cabinet Submission no. 571, 13 May 1969, NAA A5882/CO310.

Secretary-General of the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, suggested that Australia would need to demonstrate its Southeast Asian character before membership could be considered.⁵³ The following year, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tun Ismail categorically ruled out Australian membership, stating that Australia and New Zealand were not in the region: “Burma, the two Vietnams, Lao and Cambodia yes, but no one else”.⁵⁴

In December 1971, Canberra’s Ambassador to Thailand reiterated to Foreign Minister Khoman Australia’s claims to regional membership based on ‘our geographical position, our security interests’, and ‘our active participation in the region’ over many years. Statements such as this had little effect with regard to ASEAN.⁵⁵ Despite the closeness of Canberra’s political and security relationships with Malaysia and Thailand, it is evident with references to Southeast Asian ‘character’ and ‘temperament’ that Australia, which had previously been considered part of the region by many Asian leaders, was, by the early 1970s, being ruled out on cultural grounds. Southeast Asian opinion wrote of the ‘intangible psychological bonds’ drawing together the ASEAN countries, ‘the development of an ASEAN consciousness and of the habit of thinking as a region’, with the organisation primarily ‘an affair of the heart, not of the head’.⁵⁶

By 1972, this exclusion and its rationale, seem to have been assimilated and accepted by Australian policy elites. For example, on 16 December 1971, a DFA policy planning paper stated:

[w]e must accept that we are simply not regarded as part of the region. It is not contested by the nations of the region that we have firm interests in the area ... but by temperament we are seen as being on the periphery—as are the Japanese.⁵⁷

53 ‘Record of a Conversation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kuala Lumpur’, 24 February 1970, NAA A1838/3006/9/1, Part 4.

54 Cited in ‘ASEAN’, NZ High Commissioner Kuala Lumpur to DEA Wellington, 27 April 1971, in NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 12; see also ‘Neutralisation of South East Asia’, DFA Policy Planning Paper, 16 December 1971, NAA A1838/625/14/3.

55 ‘ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting at Kuala Lumpur’, Australian Embassy Bangkok to DFA Canberra, 10 December 1971, NAA A1838/250/10/7, Part 9.

56 ‘Attitudes of Member Countries to ASEAN’, DFA Canberra to Djakarta, Tokyo, Singapore, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Seoul, Bangkok, New Delhi, Manila, London, Rangoon, Washington, Phnom Penh, Wellington, Vientiane, Paris, Saigon and Moscow, 26 September 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 18.

57 ‘Neutralisation of South East Asia’, DFA Policy Planning Paper, 16 December 1971, NAA A1838/625/14/3, Part 2.

On 27 April 1972, a DFA memorandum argued that:

Quite apart from the fact that the present members don't want us, or anybody else, as members, the central point is that the attractions and value of ASEAN stem from its smallness, the geographical proximity of member countries, their more or less community of interests and outlooks, and their 'Asian-ness'. Australia does not fit into this pattern, and I don't see that it ever will.⁵⁸

It may be observed that on gaining office in December 1972, Whitlam's push toward a broader definition of regional community that included Australia, Japan and possibly the PRC was diametrically opposed to the direction of thinking about regional solidarity in ASEAN states, which, as demonstrated here, was also recognised in the Australian foreign policy bureaucracy.

De-escalation in Vietnam and the Nixon Doctrine

The US de-escalation and withdrawal from Vietnam that began on 31 March 1968 did not bring Australia closer to the region despite the claims of the Whitlam Government and later myth of Asian engagement. Rather, the waning of the US commitment to South Vietnam, and the Nixon Doctrine that the non-communist countries of East Asia must take up more of the burden of providing for their own security, eroded one of the essential pillars of Australia's deep integration with the region: non-communist solidarity. Albeit with deep concerns expressed by Thailand and Singapore, the impending US withdrawal of its direct military presence in Southeast Asia prompted ASEAN members to turn inward and consolidate the organisation as a bulwark against Chinese influence, canvassing Malaysian-led proposals for 'neutralisation' that would exclude all great powers and their close allies from the area.⁵⁹

58 'Australia and Asia', DFA Memorandum, KI Gates (Malaysia-Singapore Section) to Mr Nutter, 27 April 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 14; see also 'Prime Minister's Visit', Australian High Commission Singapore to Canberra, Kuala Lumpur, Djakarta, 11 June 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 15.

59 See, for example, 'Neutralisation of South East Asia', DFA Policy Paper, 14 January 1971, NAA A1838/625/14/3, Part 1; 'Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy—1971', 19 May 1971, NAA A1209/1971/9495; 'Neutralisation', Australian High Commission Kuala Lumpur (Rowland) to DFA Canberra, 27 July 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 16.

The idea of a neutral Southeast Asia had been advanced by Kuala Lumpur in various forms since 1965. However, with the changes to the regional environment in the late 1960s analysed in this chapter, Malaysian advocacy for neutralisation became more sustained. In a radio speech on 31 January 1968, Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman proposed—as a first step—non-aggression pacts between Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Burma and Thailand. This would be augmented by a neutrality agreement, where ASEAN members would ensure they remained neutral in the event of war or military conflict in Asia. The final step of the proposal was that the neutrality of the ASEAN area as a whole would be guaranteed by the United States, the Soviet Union and China, who would respect the independence of Southeast Asian states.⁶⁰

Subsequent Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak (1970–76) strongly advocated for the neutralisation proposal in the early 1970s on the basis of continued communist subversive activity in the ASEAN area, the reduction of US forces in Indochina as part of the Nixon Doctrine, the impending British withdrawal from the ANZAM area (and uncertainty about Australia's and New Zealand's willingness to fill this role in a substantial way for more than a few years), and a general sentiment on the part of ASEAN members that foreign powers should no longer have a military role in Southeast Asia. These Malaysian proposals were judged by Australia's DFA to be generally in line with the thinking in Jakarta, Rangoon, Phnom Penh and Vientiane, although less so in Bangkok and Singapore.⁶¹ A great power guarantee of this neutrality was never practicable, but other aspects of the Malaysian neutralisation proposal were formally adopted in November 1971 with the Declaration of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality in Southeast Asia.⁶² This initiative led to the later Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (1976), which became possible after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, and to which new ASEAN members have to accede upon entry to the organisation.

60 'Malaysia: Attitudes Towards Regional Defence', 25 February 1968, NAA A1209/1969/9036, Part 3.

61 'Neutralisation of South East Asia', DFA Policy Paper, 14 January 1971, NAA A1838/625/14/3, Part 1.

62 'Neutralisation of South East Asia', DFA Canberra, Policy Planning Paper, 16 December 1971, NAA A1838/625/14/3, Part 2.

President Johnson's statement on 31 March 1968 of a limiting of US operations in Vietnam and his decision not to seek re-election was met with 'shock' by 'the non-aligned countries' and by 'America's allies'.⁶³ As is well known, the Australian Government, as 'a fighting ally' in Vietnam, was deeply disturbed and embarrassed by the lack of prior consultation about Johnson's statement.⁶⁴ Prime Minister Gorton wrote to Keith Waller, Australia's Ambassador in Washington:

I should like you to make sure ... that the President and his senior aides are made aware of our disappointment and great embarrassment that one of America's closest allies should have been given so little opportunity to address itself properly to the President's proposals and no opportunity to be ready to make informed comments on them immediately on their being made public.⁶⁵

Australia's disengagement from its 1965 commitment to South Vietnam began on 17 November 1970 with the withdrawal of the 8th Australian army battalion.⁶⁶ On 18 August 1971, Prime Minister William McMahon (1971–72) announced 'that the combat role which Australia took up over six years ago in Vietnam is soon to be completed'. While allowing time for the South Vietnamese to adjust their force dispositions, the government had 'decided to withdraw all remaining Australian combat forces from Vietnam' by Christmas 1971. Stores, equipment and other infrastructure would follow in 1972.⁶⁷

The Nixon administration (1969–74) came to office convinced that the US must extricate itself from Johnson's disastrous Vietnam intervention. In addition, the deep divisions evident in the communist world with the Sino–Soviet split, the trend 'of USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] policy towards peaceful co-existence and stabilization of the

63 'Press Reaction to President Johnson's Statement', UK High Commission Canberra to Commonwealth Office (CO) London, 2 April 1968, TNA FCO 24/132.

64 Australian Embassy Washington to DEA Canberra (for the Prime Minister from Waller), 2 April 1968, NAA A1209/1968/8615.

65 DEA Canberra to Australian Embassy Washington (for Waller from Prime Minister), 2 April 1968, NAA A1209/1968/8615; see also UK High Commission Canberra to CO (also Washington, Wellington and POLAD Singapore), 8 April 1968, TNA FCO/24/132.

66 Report by UK High Commission Canberra to FCO South West Pacific Dept., 17 November 1970, TNA FCO 24/692.

67 'Statement in the House of Representatives by the Prime Minister, The Rt. Hon. William McMahon, Future of Australian Forces in Vietnam, 18 August 1971', in TNA FCO 24/1061; see also UK High Commission Canberra (PM Vereker) to FCO South West Pacific Dept. (RD Wall), 24 August 1971, TNA FCO 24/1061.

international order⁶⁸ and the consolidation of the Suharto regime in Indonesia indicated a more benign global situation and less threatening regional environment. Australia remained uneasy, however, as the Nixon administration took office in early 1969. On 26 February, Gorton confirmed that Australia would retain its existing forces in Malaysia and Singapore after Britain's withdrawal,⁶⁹ but strategic planning documents also recognised that the 'forward defence policy' could not continue without the US presence.⁷⁰ A marked change in Canberra's rhetoric about Vietnam can be observed at this time. This change of tone paralleled Canberra's backing away from its prior claims to a special Commonwealth responsibility in Southeast Asia. For example, on 14 January 1970 in a meeting with Nixon's Vice President Spiro Agnew in Canberra, the Australian position was that Vietnam 'was not a war which could be justified, as World War I and II could be justified, by demonstrating a situation of proximate danger to the Australian community'.⁷¹ Statements such as these were starkly at odds with Menzies' alarmist rhetoric about the threat of Chinese communist expansion into Southeast Asia, justifying the initial Australian commitment to South Vietnam.⁷²

Later termed the Nixon or Guam doctrine, the US administration's 'new approach in East Asia' explicitly recognised that 'the Republic of China on Taiwan and Communist China on the mainland' were both 'facts of life'. Washington would now 'encourage Asian countries to take the initiative in terms of improving their own internal situation and that of the region'. Aid priority would be given to those countries that 'do most to help themselves and cooperate with their neighbors'.⁷³ Canberra's assessment of this was that SEATO was now moribund and Washington's security role in Asia would be 'severely curtailed'. It was further forecast that the 'extent of U.S. economic and political involvement' would be reduced, and that the 'countries of the region will be expected to develop their own security arrangements to counter all but a nuclear threat'. Finally, 'by omission rather than affirmation', the Guam doctrine suggested that

68 'Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy 1968', 19 August 1968, NAA M3787/44.

69 'Press Reaction to Gorton Defence Statement', 26 February 1969, TNA FCO 24/355.

70 See 'Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy 1968', 19 August 1968, NAA M3787/44.

71 'Decision No. 64, Without Submission—Discussions with Mr. Spiro T. Agnew, Vice-President of the United States', Cabinet Minute, 14 January 1970, NAA A5882/CO795.

72 See, for example, Garry Woodard, *Asian Alternatives: Australia's Vietnam Decision and Lessons on Going to War* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), 285; and Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2008), 119–20.

73 Australian Embassy Washington to DEA Canberra, 8 October 1969, NAA A1838/541/1/13, Part 2.

‘in the Nixon Administration’s view, Southeast Asia ... is not vital to the American interest’.⁷⁴ The Nixon Doctrine brought an end to Australia’s Cold War military posture of forward defence in Southeast Asia.

Whatever its merits, Australia’s forward defence strategy in the 1950s and 1960s, with its background condition of reliance on ‘great and powerful friends’, had unequivocally placed it in the region. It required the forging and balancing of relations in a complex and sometimes delicate regional setting and required Canberra to view the world from a Southeast Asian standpoint, rather than the South Pacific perspective it was forced to adopt during the 1970s. The winding down of Australia’s forward defence strategy in parallel with both British and American withdrawal from direct involvement in Southeast Asia was a disengagement from its previously deep regional integration, not the beginning of ‘genuine’ engagement as is often claimed.

Sino–US rapprochement and the breakdown of ASPAC

The final major external factor identified here that pushed Australia outside the margins of the region is the 15 July 1971 announcement of Nixon’s impending visit to Beijing and US rapprochement with communist China. In conjunction with these developments and a more conciliatory Chinese disposition, some East Asian states were prompted, albeit reluctantly, to move to accommodate Beijing. This meant cutting ties with Taiwan and further downgrading ASPAC, which had already been superseded by ASEAN, to the point of insignificance. Thus, Australia’s primary vehicle for inclusion in regional organisation, grounded in non-communist Asian solidarity, evaporated in the early 1970s.

Whitlam’s visit to China from 4 to 9 July 1971 as leader of the Australian parliamentary opposition—almost coinciding with Henry Kissinger’s secret visit from 9 to 11 July—is generally seen as a political masterstroke. It should be noted, however, that while Whitlam’s visit was able to garner maximum publicity, the Coalition Government was already moving, albeit more cautiously, in the same direction. The documentary record shows that as Foreign Minister in October 1970, McMahon had instigated

74 Australian Embassy Washington to DEA Canberra, 24 February 1970, NAA M3787/40.

a China study with a view to normalising relations. Subsequently, Australian diplomats had at least two secret meetings in Paris on 27 May and 2 July 1971 to open a dialogue with PRC officials, in addition to informal contacts via the countries' respective embassies in Belgrade, Yugoslavia.⁷⁵ These developments preceded the Whitlam and Kissinger visits to China and demonstrated that the Coalition Government's policy was converging with both the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Opposition and the Nixon administration. For example, Prime Minister McMahon said in May 1972 that 'we would not oppose China's representation and admission to the United Nations', and 'that it was inevitable and right that China should be a member of the United Nations General Assembly and should hold the permanent seat in the Security Council'.⁷⁶ However, unaware of Kissinger's preparations, and due to the nature of diplomacy, formal Australian Government initiatives could not be publicised. Thus, for domestic political consumption, the McMahon Government was publicly critical of the Whitlam visit to China and then looked inept when the Nixon visit was made public shortly thereafter.

Moves by the McMahon Government to normalise relations with the PRC seem to have stalled, however, by early 1972.⁷⁷ The Chinese were no longer responding to approaches from Alan Renouf, Australia's Ambassador in Paris. The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) believed the Chinese were 'no doubt waiting to see if an ALP government' was returned in Australia, 'in which case diplomatic recognition is a certainty'.⁷⁸ From the Australian side, the lack of movement was also partly due to domestic political dynamics in the need for the Coalition Government in its dying days to placate the staunchly anti-communist Democratic Labor Party,

75 UK High Commission Canberra to Sir Alec Douglas-Home (Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs), 11 June 1971, TNA FCO 24/1043; 'For Press, Relations with the People's Republic of China, Statement by the Prime Minister', 18 July 1971, NAA A1209/1969/9054, Part 1; 'Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. William McMahon, Victorian Division State Council of the Liberal Party of Australia, Melbourne', 28 July 1971, NAA A1209/1969/9054, Part 2; 'Visit of the Australian Prime Minister to the United Kingdom, 7–13 November 1971', FCO Brief, 3 November 1971, TNA Cabinet Office Records (CAB) 133/401.

76 'Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. William McMahon, Victorian Division State Council of the Liberal Party of Australia, Melbourne', 28 July 1971, NAA A1209/1969/9054, Part 2; see also Owen Harries, 'Australia's Foreign Policy under Whitlam', *Orbis: Journal of World Affairs* 19, no. 3 (1975): 1096, as to how the changing circumstances of the late 1960s and early 1970s 'would have forced *any* Australian government some way along the path taken by the Labor government' (emphasis in original).

77 'President Nixon's Visit to China: Mr. Marshall Green's Briefing of the Australians', UK High Commission Canberra (W Peters) to FCO South West Pacific Dept (JK Hickman), 21 March 1972, TNA FCO 24/1334.

78 UK High Commission Canberra to FCO London, 29 February 1972, TNA FCO 24/1337.

but also reportedly due to pressure from Indonesia's President Suharto, who opposed diplomatic recognition of Beijing.⁷⁹ Japan was in advance of Australia in this respect, recognising Beijing and normalising its relations with the PRC on 29 September 1972. This was sought by Beijing as much as by Tokyo. The DFA assessed that the Chinese would see Sino–Japanese normalisation as preventing closer Soviet–Japanese relations, while also signalling a further loss of legitimacy and international support for Taiwan, thereby encouraging other countries to follow Tokyo's example.⁸⁰ The Australian Government considered the normalisation of Sino–Japanese diplomatic relations to be a positive development, but believed it was unlikely to portend a closer political relationship between the two. The DFA assessment presciently added that 'China and Japan will find themselves vying, over the longer term, for political and economic influence in the Asia/Pacific region'.⁸¹

Similar to the March 1968 Johnson statement on Vietnam, Canberra was not consulted in advance about the announcement of Nixon's visit to China. Along with other Asian Treaty allies Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines, the Australian Government received around 20 minutes' notice of Nixon's statement on 15 July 1971 accepting the invitation to visit the PRC 'to seek the normalization of relations between the two countries and also to exchange views on questions of concern to the two sides'.⁸² McMahon wrote to Nixon on 18 July endorsing the US initiative on China as consistent with his 'own policy seeking to normalise relations between Australia and China'. However, the Australian Government was 'placed in a quandary' by the 'lack of any foreknowledge' of this dramatic step. While stating his understanding that Kissinger's visit required the maintenance of secrecy, McMahon noted that Canberra's:

79 Ibid.; see also 'Extract from DFA Policy Planning Paper No. 45 of 5.10.72', 5 October 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 19.

80 'Assessment of PRC/Japan Normalisation Agreement', DFA Canberra to All Posts, 9 October 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 19.

81 Ibid.

82 United States Information Service Official Text, 15 July 1971, in NAA A1209/1969/9054, Part 1; see also Australian Embassy Washington (Plimsoll) to DEA Canberra for PM, Minister and Secretary DFA, 15 July 1971, NAA A1209/1969/9054, Part 1; Australian Embassy Washington to DFA Canberra, 16 July 1971, NAA A1209/1969/9054, Part 1; DFA Canberra to Australian Embassy Tokyo (for Prime Minister Sato from Mr McMahon), 18 July 1971, NAA A1209/1969/9054, Part 1; 'Decision No. 262, Without Submission—President Nixon—Visit to China', Cabinet Minute, 20 July 1971, NAA A5882/CO1241.

relations with The People's Republic of China have in recent weeks been a matter of deep public controversy in Australia following a visit to Peking by members of the Australian Labor Party, including the leader of the opposition Mr Whitlam.⁸³

The Coalition Government had:

felt obliged to criticise many of the things which Mr Whitlam said and did in Peking including some quite gratuitous attacks and criticism of our friends and allies including the United States and indeed his reference to the need for you yourself to change your policies or get defeated.

The government's criticisms may 'have been cast differently had we been given an indication of changes in American policy'.⁸⁴

Australia was not unique in this respect. In addition to the obvious case of Taiwan, all US-aligned countries in the region were 'irritated by the American failure to consult them', especially since the abrupt change of policy reversed positions that they had been publicly supporting. A brief from the UK FCO reported that '[t]he Philippines, like the Japanese, have been irritated to find themselves identified with an American policy which the Americans themselves subsequently abandoned without warning—and without any early attempt to explain the implications to their allies'.⁸⁵ The historic Nixon visit duly took place from 21 to 28 February 1972 with general undertakings of eventually withdrawing all US forces from Southeast Asia and Taiwan, that Taiwan was an integral part of China, and that settlement of the Taiwan question was a matter for the Chinese people.⁸⁶

It is also interesting to note that, rather than the Sino–US rapprochement being an initiative of Nixon and Kissinger, the approach originated from Beijing. In a meeting with McMahon and other senior ministers, the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and later Ambassador to Australia, Marshall Green, revealed that the:

83 DFA Canberra to Australian Embassy Washington (to President Nixon from McMahon), 18 July 1971, NAA A1209/1969/9054, Part 1.

84 Ibid.

85 'Visit of the Australian Prime Minister to the United Kingdom, 7–13 November 1971', FCO Brief, 3 November 1971, TNA CAB 133/401.

86 'Press Cuttings Nixon Visit China', 29 February 1972, NAA A1209/1969/9054, Part 2.

initiative for President Nixon's visit came from the Chinese themselves to the President. It was the Chinese who had wanted a joint communique. It was the Chinese who had wanted the approach to the United States to go forward. For this ... they had paid a considerable price including in terms of their own dogma.⁸⁷

According to Washington, the motivations behind Beijing's more conciliatory attitude was fear of the Soviet Union, which had 41 divisions massed on China's northern frontier including a tactical nuclear capability. Mongolia was an armed Soviet satellite state. The Chinese were also wary of Japan's economic success and that this might translate into a return to militarist behaviour. These concerns now outweighed Beijing's wariness about US policy in the area. Consequently, it was also likely that the PRC would be less likely to support subversive communist movements in Southeast Asia. The Americans noted that in the talks Beijing backed away from long-held positions such as abrogation of Washington's Mutual Defence Treaty with Taiwan and the immediate withdrawal of all US forces from Thailand and the Philippines.⁸⁸

For Australia's engagement with East Asia, one of the most significant consequences of the US rapprochement with the PRC was the breakdown of ASPAC. Of the ASPAC members, Japan and Malaysia were the two most concerned to engage and accommodate Beijing. This meant the generally anti-communist 'aura' of the organisation and any formal association with the Republic of China was no longer palatable.⁸⁹ Australia assessed that there was no prospect of Taipei withdrawing voluntarily, but 'that ASPAC's credibility as a representative forum would be seriously damaged by the withdrawal of either Malaysia or Japan'.⁹⁰ Malaysia, which had always been ASPAC's most reluctant member, ceased to participate from 1971.⁹¹ New Prime Minister Razak was more determined than his predecessor to emphasise Malaysia's non-aligned status.⁹² Thailand felt

87 'Record of Conversation between the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Mr Marshall Green in Sydney on 14 March 1972', in TNA FCO 24/1334.

88 Ibid.

89 Australian High Commission Wellington (AJ Melhuish) to Secretary DFA Canberra, (covering letter for a NZ Foreign Ministry brief on regional cooperation in Asia), 25 May 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 15.

90 'DFA Submission to Minister on China Policy, Final', 4 November 1971, NAA A1838/541/1/3.

91 DFA (DG Nutter, Assistant Secretary South East Asia Branch) to Australian Embassy Seoul, 16 December 1971, NAA A1838/541/4, Part 3.

92 Australian Embassy Seoul (MGM Boucher, Ambassador) to Secretary DFA Canberra, 14 January 1972, NAA A1838/541/1/3.

that without Malaysia, it was unlikely to participate any further as well.⁹³ The Japanese approach was quieter in de-emphasising its membership and letting ASPAC gradually wind down. This mirrored Canberra's position, which was that it did

not want to see the collapse of the only regional political association of which we are a member, particularly as there is at present no foreseeable prospect of the setting-up of any alternative grouping.⁹⁴

The same dynamics applied to SEATO, which, although of enduring value to Thailand, had been effectively moribund for some time, with no meaningful participation by Pakistan or France.⁹⁵ The Whitlam Opposition had advocated for the immediate elimination of both organisations, but on attaining power, decided to take a lower profile approach.⁹⁶ In March 1973, directives were sent that Australia's participation in ASPAC political activities and technical centres should be wound up.⁹⁷ Planning for the dissolution of SEATO was instigated by Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines in August 1975.⁹⁸ ASPAC and SEATO were quietly dissolved in 1975 and 1977 respectively, thereby formally ending Australia's role as a core member of East Asian regional organisations.

ASEAN states acknowledged that US rapprochement with China and Japan's normalisation of relations required them to come to a greater accommodation with Beijing—ASPAC being one of the casualties of this. Malaysia was reportedly most keen in this respect. Kuala Lumpur was encouraged by references in the joint Japan–PRC communiqué

93 DFA (DG Nutter, Assistant Secretary South East Asia Branch) to Australian Embassy Seoul, 16 December 1971, NAA A1838/541/4, Part 3.

94 'DFA Submission to Minister on China Policy, Final', 4 November 1971, NAA A1838/541/1/3; see also Australian High Commission Wellington (AJ Melhuish) to Secretary DFA, Canberra, (covering letter for a NZ Foreign Ministry brief on regional cooperation in Asia), 25 May 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 15.

95 'Record of Seventeenth Meeting of the Council of the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) Held in Canberra on 27–28 June', UK Embassy Bangkok to Sir Douglas-Home (Foreign Secretary), 11 July 1972, TNA FCO 15/1663; 'SEATO', DFA Brief, NAA A1838/686/1, Part 10.

96 UK High Commissioner Canberra to FCO (Personal for Prime Minister Heath from Defence Secretary Carrington), 21 February 1973, TNA FCO 24/1596; 'ASEAN, Neutralisation, Regional Organisations', DFA Brief for Visit of Tun Dr. Ismail (Deputy Prime Minister, Malaysia), 11–18 March 1973, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 23.

97 DFA Policy Information Report (from Deputy Secretary to Heads of Mission), March 1973, NAA A1838/2036/30/1, Part 1; 'ASEAN, Neutralisation, Regional Organisations', DFA Brief for Visit of Tun Dr. Ismail (Deputy Prime Minister, Malaysia), 11–18 March 1973, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 23.

98 FCO London to British Embassy Bangkok (copy to Canberra, Manila, Washington, Wellington and UKMIS New York), 28 August 1975, TNA FCO 24/2061.

on normalisation that both sides would refrain from 'any efforts to establish 'hegemony' in the Asian Pacific region', which was consistent with Malaysia's 'concept of neutralization in South-East Asia'.⁹⁹ For the other ASEAN members, especially Indonesia, there remained significant suspicion of Beijing and no prospect of diplomatic recognition for the foreseeable future. In a visit by Japanese Foreign Minister Kiichi Aichi (1968–71) to Jakarta to explain Tokyo's position on normalisation, the Australian Embassy reported that President Suharto:

had offered no comment on [the] normalisation of relations [between Japan and China]. He had reiterated very firmly Indonesia's own conditions for normalisation. He had spelled out very emphatically the traumatic Indonesian experience of 1965 and went on to state that the Chinese had given no signs of abating its propaganda or subversion activities. He gave no indication of any intention on the part of the Indonesian Government to review its policy at a future time.¹⁰⁰

Indonesia's relations with China were suspended, while Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore had no formal relations with the PRC.¹⁰¹ It was not until 1975 that the ASEAN states granted diplomatic recognition to Beijing.

The DFA assessed that there was no prospect of the Suharto regime seeking to re-establish relations at the time and, indeed, was likely to strongly discourage other ASEAN members from moving in that direction. In response to Japan's initiative, Thailand publicly stated it would not follow suit because of continuing Chinese-sponsored insurgency on their territory and strong economic links with Taiwan. Singapore stated it would move slowly on the issue and 'would regard Indonesia as the pace-setter with the ASEAN group'.¹⁰² In the Philippines, President Ferdinand Marcos (1965–86) was combatting an internal communist insurgency, so was deemed by Canberra unlikely to support normalisation of relations. The Chinese business community in the Philippines also reportedly opposed opening relations with the PRC.¹⁰³ The DFA noted that Australia:

99 'Extract from DFA Policy Planning Paper No. 45 of 5.10.72', 5 October 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 19.

100 Australian Embassy Jakarta to DFA Canberra, 18 October 1972, NAA A1838/541/1/3.

101 'Extract from DFA Policy Planning Paper No. 45 of 5.10.72', 5 October 1972, NAA A1838/3004/13/21, Part 19.

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid.

cannot hope, however, to have much influence on their policies on this issue, which will be based almost exclusively on their own assessment of where their particular interests lie. Indonesia would, no doubt, be unhappy if we moved too quickly on recognition of the PRC, but must expect us to do so in time.¹⁰⁴

What this suggests, is that while the much-lauded Whitlam Government recognition of the PRC on 21 December 1972 may have been consistent with Japanese policy and broader global trends, it was out of step with Australia's Southeast Asian neighbours. As ASEAN turned inward to consolidate, Whitlam's diplomatic recognition of the PRC further served to politically isolate Australia from its immediate region of Southeast Asia. This is an important theme taken up in the following chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the changing structural conditions from 1966 into the early 1970s—the end of British decolonisation in Southeast Asia and the easing of Cold War pressures—that gradually eroded Australia's formerly deep engagement, serving to politically distance Canberra from East Asia. The results of these changes were profound. As the following chapter will show, Australia's political position was transformed from being an integral part of Southeast Asia's decolonisation process, and a core non-communist Asian state, into one of the South Pacific periphery.

Australia's sense of Commonwealth responsibility, which the evidence suggests had become increasingly reluctant by the mid-1960s, faded with the end of Indonesia's Confrontation of Malaysia in 1966 and the retrenchment of British global power with the commitment to withdraw from east of Suez. The acceleration of Britain's withdrawal from Southeast Asia announced in January 1968 and the ongoing war in Vietnam ushered in a more instrumental and narrowly interest-based regional outlook on the part of Australian policymakers. This change of outlook is particularly evident in the policy discourse of the Gorton Government compared with its predecessors, and in negotiations for the FPDA that superseded Australia's association with the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreements (1957–71). The end of British decolonisation in the ANZAM area

104 Ibid.

removed the central tenet of Australia's normative responsibilities in Southeast Asia, clearing the way for a more instrumental conception of Australia's regional interests from the late 1960s.

The US de-escalation and gradual withdrawal from Vietnam that began in 1968 did not bring Australia closer to the region despite the claims of the Whitlam Government and later myth of Asian engagement. Rather, the waning of the US commitment to South Vietnam and the Nixon Doctrine seriously eroded the second essential pillar of Australia's deep integration with the region during this period: non-communist solidarity. By the early 1970s, the previous forms of solidarity that had integrated Australia with the region—Commonwealth responsibilities in the ANZAM area and non-communist identity via ASPAC and SEATO—had also disintegrated or been superseded by ASEAN, pushing Australia to the margins of regional organisation. Finally, Whitlam's much-lauded diplomatic recognition of the PRC on taking office in December 1972 may have been consistent with the Japanese position at the time, but as the following chapter shows, it further isolated Australia from its Southeast Asian neighbours, particularly Indonesia.

This text is taken from *Commonwealth Responsibility and Cold War Solidarity: Australia in Asia, 1944–74*, by Dan Halvorson, published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.