

Neutrality and neutralism in Southeast Asia, 1960-1970

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Neutrality and Neutralism in Southeast Asia, 1960-1970

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Table of contents

1	Neutralism in Southeast Asia	1
2	Laos Neutralised	4
3	No Neutrality for Vietnam.....	9
4	Neutralist Diem?	15
5	Neutralist Generals?	19
6	Cambodian ‘Sideshow’	24
7	The China Factor	33

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1 Neutralism in Southeast Asia

In Europe, the United States had to handle existing and traditional neutrals like Sweden and Switzerland or, as in the case of Austria, it was faced with the question of neutralising a country that was domestically at peace. In Southeast Asia the situation was different. Most countries had only recently obtained their independence, traditional neutrals did not exist, and those aiming at neutralisation were domestically fragile or in a state of war. Furthermore, the concept of *neutralism* was on the rise and did much to confuse matters – as the United States was soon to discover.

Neutralism was a product of the Cold War and of decolonisation. Many of the newly independent countries had no desire to align with either the former colonial power or with the Soviet Union. They preferred an intermediate status, which became known as neutralism or non-alignment. Its chief protagonists in those early years were the leaders of India, Indonesia, Egypt, and Yugoslavia – Nehru, Sukarno, Nasser, and Tito.¹

The first large neutralist gathering took place at Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. Twenty-nine countries, most of them Asian, participated. It was a heterogeneous group including, among others, Maoist China, neutral Cambodia, and American allies like Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand. The rhetoric was stridently anti-colonial and anti-capitalist, which suited the Soviets because at that very time Khrushchev was making efforts to intensify relations with what became known as the Third World. Later on that policy included military support for 'wars of national liberation.'² Small wonder that Dulles perceived neutralism as a movement working to the advantage of Moscow and to the disadvantage of the United States, especially in Asia.

At the 1954 Geneva Conference, Dulles made sure that the issue of neutrality did not appear on the agenda. As shown earlier, he preferred allies to neutrals, and he had plans for an alliance system in Southeast Asia. Only two months after the Geneva conference, the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was set up in Manila. Its members included the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and

¹ Richard L. Jackson, *The Non-Aligned, the UN and the Superpowers* (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 11-36.

² George C. Herring, *America's Longest War, The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), pp. 73-6.

Pakistan. The alliance was part of the American containment policy euphemistically identified with 'collective security,' a term generally reserved for the United Nations. At heart SEATO was an anti-Communist alliance, but it was also meant to contain neutralism.³

In a supplementary protocol the SEATO members pledged to protect three non-signatory states: South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Before 1954, all three had been part of French Indochina, but from an American perspective *South Vietnam* was the most important. Once the French withdrew, the United States began to support the new regime politically, economically, and militarily. Given the attempt by the National Liberation Front (NLF), supported by North Vietnam, to unite the country by force the American commitment became steadily more important. As the Cold War intensified, successive American administrations regarded South Vietnam as the place where the spread of communism had to be stopped. There were those in Saigon and in Washington who disagreed and suggested that Vietnam should be neutralised – which in effect meant American withdrawal. Such voices were squelched, however, and the United States began to fight a war that could not be won and that traumatised an entire generation of Americans.

Laos was a troubled country, too. From the very beginning it was divided three ways. When Kennedy came to power, the pro-Western faction was headed by General Phoumi, whose troops had been supported secretly for years by the Eisenhower Administration. The pro-North Vietnamese Pathet Lao faction was led by Prince Souvannavong. Prince Souvanna Phouma tried to steer a middle course between the other two and called himself a neutralist. His attempts at forming coalition governments were adamantly opposed by Dulles.⁴ That changed during the Kennedy years. JFK agreed to the neutralisation of Laos early in his administration, but the scheme did not work. Laos, too, was drawn into the Vietnam War.

Of the three countries *Cambodia* was initially the most robust. Its president, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, was the first Indochinese leader to call himself both a neutral and a neutralist. He was a fervent nationalist with a quixotic personality, but he managed to keep the country out

³ When it was set up Rusk thought SEATO was unnecessary, but once Secretary of State he was heavily committed to defend the principle of "collective security"; see Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1990), p. 426); see also George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1982), p. 361.

⁴ For a discussion of American policy during these years, see Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, pp. 51-7, 78-87, 94-199; see also Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 361-2.

of overt war until the late 1960s. His neutralism did not endear him to Dulles, however, and as a result Cambodian relations with the Eisenhower Administration were strained. The Kennedy years saw some improvement, but as the Vietnam War escalated under President Johnson, relations deteriorated. Animated by the Laos neutralisation, Prince Sihanouk made various attempts to set up an international conference guaranteeing Cambodia neutrality. His efforts failed, however, and in May 1965 Cambodia severed its relations with the United States. When relations were restored in 1969 Sihanouk had already lost his grip on the country, and at the same time, the Nixon administration began its secret Cambodian bombing campaign. From that moment on, events took a tragic turn ending, after 1975, in the barbaric rule of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge.⁵

This short summary shows that the fates of Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam were closely intertwined – as was the question of neutrality. When Laos was neutralized in 1962, Norodom Sihanouk immediately wanted a similar solution for Cambodia. Later on, as the war in South Vietnam bogged down, many South Vietnamese, but also some of the ruling generals, searched for a negotiated (or neutralist) solution with the NLF. French President Charles de Gaulle was a constant supporter of neutralism, and some top advisers in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations also favoured neutralist solutions for Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

Ultimately, however, the opponents of neutrality had the upper hand. The worst enemies of neutrality sat in Hanoi. The regime in North Vietnam had no intention of making the classical concept work or of guaranteeing the non-aligned independence of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh and his successors aimed at dominating former Indochina, under the guise of 'neutralism' if necessary. Most decision-makers in Washington were unwilling to let that happen, because they thought in ideological terms and equated the 'loss' of Indochina with global defeat. The true reason for the failure of neutrality (or of neutralism) in Southeast Asia lay therefore not primarily in a false understanding of the concept itself but in clashing interests and security perceptions.

These perceptions and interests turned out to be mistaken, on the part of both the North Vietnamese and the Americans. Eventually North Vietnam realised it could not dominate all of Indochina, and the United States finally learnt that 'losing' Indochina did not undermine its

⁵ William Shawcross, *Sideshow, Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

global security position. At present no North Vietnamese documents are available that would allow evaluation of the factors underlying their miscalculations, but it is evident that the 'China factor' played an important role in American calculations. Washington was right in expecting a 'second Korea' or a massive Chinese intervention should the United States make an attempt to conquer North Vietnam, but it was wrong in perceiving China as a global threat. While it was true that Mao (and Khrushchev) supported 'wars of national liberation,' these contests did not affect the core areas of American security, which lay in Europe, the North Atlantic, and in the 'blue waters' of the Pacific.

2 Laos Neutralised

Originally the conflict in Laos was anti-colonial in character, but by the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s it had also become part of the Cold War and the struggle between ideologies. It was seen as one more 'war of national liberation' fought by the anti-imperialist (or socialist) forces against the capitalist West. On 6 January 1961, just two weeks before JFK's inauguration, Khrushchev announced that henceforth the Soviet Union would actively support such wars.⁶ In his campaign Kennedy had criticised the Eisenhower Administration for not paying enough attention to the emerging Third World. It was no surprise, therefore, when in his first State of the Union Message of 30 January 1961 Kennedy promised to broaden US foreign policy and to pay particular attention to the economic and military needs of developing countries.⁷ His administration was willing to meet the new challenge, in Cuba, the Congo – and in Laos.

When Kennedy took office Laos was topmost on the foreign policy agenda. For years the war in Laos had been shifting back and forth, but beginning in December of 1960, the situation was taking a dramatic turn. Pro-American General Phoumi had scored a short-lived military victory – with unfortunate consequences. Phoumi's success drove neutralist Souvanna

⁶ Khrushchev Report on Moscow Conference of Representatives of Communist and Workers Parties, 6 January 1961, John F. Kennedy Library, POF Box 126a, USSR, Khrushchev Reports, 1961, 23-24.

⁷ *Public Papers, 1961, John F. Kennedy*; Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 30, 1961, pp. 19-28.

Phouma into the countryside, where he joined Souvannavong.⁸ It also gave the Soviets a pretext to start a massive airlift on 13 December.

The Eisenhower Administration was alarmed but remained largely inactive. It was unsure about the wisdom of military intervention, but it was also unwilling to abandon Phoumi and to back a neutralist government in Vientiane. When the foreign policy teams of the incoming and the outgoing administrations met on 19 January, the dilemma was plainly visible. Although accounts vary on the details discussed and the opinions voiced, it is clear that while Eisenhower was unprepared to abandon Laos, he was equally unwilling to commit regular American forces.⁹ The neutralisation option was not mentioned at all.¹⁰

As it turned out, Kennedy was equally unwilling to significantly increase the American military presence but, and this was the major difference between the two administrations, he was ready to back neutralist Souvanna Phouma and to give neutralisation a try.¹¹ Although Laos was not a major campaign issue and JFK had not committed himself in any way, he had been advised by some members of his entourage to aim at an internationally negotiated neutralisation. At this early stage, the chief advocates of such a policy were Chester Bowles, Ambassador at Large, and Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield.¹² They proposed neutrality not only for Laos, but also for all of Indochina. When it came to Vietnam later on, they were joined by Under Secretary of State George W. Ball. All three were known as Eurocentred experts who did not think that Southeast Asia should be given top priority.

⁸ For an assessment of the situation, see Chester Bowles, *Promises to Keep, My Years in Public Life 1941-1969* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 334-335; for a general background discussion, see Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, pp. 94-118, 142-170.

⁹ *FRUS*, Vol. XXIV (1961-3), pp. 1-25; Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception", in *Journal of American History*, Vol. 79/2 (September 1992), pp. 568-87; Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 428; Charles A. Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere, American Policy Toward Laos Since 1954* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 123-8.

¹⁰ As far as can be derived from *FRUS* documents the Eisenhower Administration never seriously considered neutralization as an option. The term 'neutral' appears at times but is used in a very general way. See, for instance, a statement by Secretary of State Herter in *FRUS*, Vol. XVI (1958-60), pp. 641-4. The vagueness also shows in a report prepared and submitted January 23, 1961, by the Eisenhower Inter-Agency Task Force on Laos; the report mentions 'neutralisation' but is very vague about what this means; see *FRUS*, Vol. XXIV (1961-3), pp. 28-40.

¹¹ Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 362-3.

¹² As early as 21 and 23 January 1961, Kennedy received two neutrality-related memos from Senator Mansfield; see Harald Biermann, *John F. Kennedy und der Kalte Krieg, Die Aussenpolitik der USA und die Grenzen der Glaubwürdigkeit* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1997), p. 91; see also Bowles, *Promises to Keep*, p. 334.

Laos was mentioned in Kennedy's first news conference, held five days after coming to office, but he avoided the term neutrality. Instead he used words like 'uncommitted' and expressed the wish that Laos would become an 'independent country not dominated by either side.'¹³ Within a month Kennedy's language changed. In a short opening statement given at a press conference held on 23 February, he made a dozen references to neutrality! No American president had in recent memory publicly referred to neutrality so often and so favourably. He announced a willingness to support a neutralist government in Vientiane and was also ready to back a British proposal for an internationally negotiated settlement, which implied the readiness to accept neutralisation.¹⁴

He embellished history by claiming that 'it was the clear premise of the 1954 settlement that this new country would be neutral... No such premise existed at the Geneva Conference, at least not on the part of the American government and, as indicated, in the years that followed, the Eisenhower Administration backed the anti-neutralist forces.'¹⁵ Kennedy therefore felt the need to emphasise that 'if in the past there has been any possible ground for misunderstanding of our desire for a truly neutral Laos, there should be none now.'¹⁶

The decision to opt for a new policy must have been made in early February, perhaps in conjunction with the NSC meeting of 8 February.¹⁷ Whatever the exact date, it was Dean Rusk himself who on 10 February sent a lengthy telegram to the embassy in Laos explaining the new policy and adding that the United States was also ready to envisage the creation of a 'neutral nations commission centering around Cambodia and Burma' to monitor military compliance. The commission was meant to replace the ineffective International Control Commission (ICC) created in Geneva in 1954, but it never came about.¹⁸

Several factors favoured the new policy. As mentioned in JFK's press conference, the United Kingdom welcomed an international conference on Laos, thereby supporting an idea originally launched by Norodom Sihanouk in January. Later on, the Soviets also backed the

¹³ Biermann, *John F. Kennedy*, p. 91; Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, p. 133.

¹⁴ Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States (PPP), *John F. Kennedy*, 1961 (January 20 to December 31, 1961), pp. 213-4.

¹⁵ Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 362.

¹⁶ PPP, p. 214.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, the summary record of the NSC meeting held on that day is rather sketchy; see *FRUS*, Vol. XXIV (1961-3), pp. 48-50.

¹⁸ *FRUS*, Vol. XXIV (1961-3), pp. 50-4.

proposal, which meant that both co-chairmen of the 1954 Geneva Conference approved the idea.¹⁹ The Indians, in their capacity as Chairman of the ICC, had called for a revival of that body as early as December.²⁰

Chester Bowles was a strong advocate of neutralisation. On 21 March he wrote a memorandum to Dean Rusk in support of a neutral solution,²¹ and two days later the secretary of state received a second, more detailed paper containing some of the arguments Bowles was to advance in the months (and years) to come. The paper started out with a reference to Korea. In that war, Bowles argued, the United States had fought under the authority of the United Nations, while in Laos 'it will be operating under the authority of SEATO, an organisation which is mistrusted by most Asians.' But there were geopolitical differences as well. Bowles was of the opinion that from a logistical point of view, the United States 'would be operating under the worst conceivable conditions,' that it could be 'vastly outnumbered' on the ground, and that it could 'become caught up in an escalating dilemma which can easily get out of control.' He added that the Soviets might see an advantage 'in embroiling the United States with the Chinese in a relatively untenable military position nine thousand miles from our shores,' and that 'the decision to stake America's power and influence on a wobbly situation nearly as close to the Chinese border as Cuba is to the United States... will appear strange indeed in the history of our time.'²²

When JFK opted for neutralisation he did not put all of his eggs into one basket, however. Upon the recommendation of Dean Rusk he pursued a two-track strategy, by including a careful analysis of all possible military options in Laos.²³ This gave people a chance to become active who had no use for neutrality at all. Two stood out amongst them: Walt W. Rostow and Roswell Gilpatric. Rostow was Counselor of the Department of State and Chairman of the Policy Planning Council and, as it turned out, a driving force behind efforts

¹⁹ Bowles, *Promises to Keep*, p. 339.

²⁰ Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, p. 122.

²¹ Bowles, *Promises to Keep*, p. 337.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 337-8.

²³ Biermann, *John F. Kennedy*, p. 92.

to get America into Vietnam.²⁴ Gilpatric was Deputy Secretary of Defense and, as of April, head of Kennedy's Vietnam Task Force. He, too, was a hard-liner.²⁵

Given the two-track approach pursued in Washington and the confusing developments within Laos, the period between JFK's press conference on 23 February and the beginning of actual negotiations at the Geneva Conference on 25 July was rather turbulent.²⁶ At times it appeared as if the administration might opt for military action after all, especially when in April General Phoumi lost further ground and Soviet airdrops continued.²⁷ However, from 14 April on, the White House was temporarily preoccupied with the Bay of Pigs disaster. For a few weeks incident quelled the taste for military action.

But the military option was put aside when on 3 May negotiations between the various Laotian factions began at Ban Namone.²⁸ At about the same time the administration's position paper for the forthcoming 14-Nation Conference on Laos was finalised.²⁹ Although Laotian neutralisation is envisaged therein, much of the language used is quite traditional and reminiscent of the policy pursued by the Eisenhower Administration. Accordingly, the United States aimed to turn the neutrals into staunch anti-Communists:

We should seek to make this Conference a turning point for Asian neutralists. In this Conference the three participating Asian neutralists will be faced with the choice of joining a diplomatic effort to *hold the line* against the Communist threat to Southeast Asia or of resigning themselves to ineffectual appeasement of a relentless Communist advance.³⁰ [emphasis added]

The conception of neutrality in this passage hardly differs from that held by the preceding administration. Neutrals were acceptable when they pursued an anti-Communist line, and the goal of Laotian neutralisation was therefore not only to extricate the United States from a

²⁴ See for instance *FRUS*, Vol. XXIV (1961-3), pp. 315-7.

²⁵ For a personal comment on Rostow, see Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 365. In May 1961 Gilpatric's Task Force submitted to the President a memorandum entitled 'A Program of Action to Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam,' which was an early expression of his views, see *FRUS*, Vol. I (1961-63), pp. 92-115; also pp. 115-123.

²⁶ An indication of this was the discussion held at a NSC meeting of April 20, 1961; see *FRUS*, Vol. XXIV (1961-3), pp. 976-80.

²⁷ Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, p. 142; Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 363.

²⁸ Biermann, *John F. Kennedy*, p. 97; Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, pp. 200-22.

²⁹ *FRUS*, Vol. XXIV (1961-3), pp. 176-83.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

political and military commitment of questionable value, but also to 'hold the line.' In the case of Austria that expectation was realistic. Whether the same would be true in Southeast Asia was questionable from the start.³¹

As the Laotian question shows, three different *neutrality conceptions* prevailed in the Kennedy Administration. Chester Bowles opted for neutrality as a means to release the United States from a hopeless commitment and as a chance to redefine the line. For John F. Kennedy and some of his advisers, the line had to be held, and – under certain circumstances – neutrality offered an opportunity to do so more flexibly. But the majority of advisers were totally opposed to neutrality and ready to hold the line at almost any price. Foremost among them were Rostow and Gilpatric. They thought Laotian neutrality would not work, which proved to be correct, and they thought the United States could take a stand almost anywhere in Southeast, which proved to be wrong.

For the time being at least, the President's intermediate position carried the day, as was evident during the Vienna summit of 3 and 4 June 1961. Kennedy met Khrushchev several times, and Laos was an important topic, on an equal footing with Cuba and nuclear weapons. The two agreed that for neither the Soviet Union nor the United States was Laos strategically important, that a negotiated settlement was in both of their interests, and that a unified, independent, and neutralised Laos should emerge.³² They also discussed neutrality, and Kennedy explained that Yugoslavia, India, and Burma were extremely satisfactory situations as far as the United States was concerned. The problem, he added, 'is if the Communist cause were to win in certain areas and if those areas were to associate themselves closely with the Soviet Union, that would create strategic problems for the United States.'³³ Once again JFK indicated his willingness to hold the line.

3 No Neutrality for Vietnam

The question of how to extricate the United States from Vietnam was raised throughout the entire 10-year war, and a number of different ideas were floated, including 'vietnamisation'

³¹ Dulles had questioned such a possibility and explicitly ruled out any parallels between Austria and Southeast Asia; see *FRUS*, Vol. XXI (1961-3), pp. 826-7.

³² *FRUS*, Vol. V (1961-3), pp. 182-97; 206-11.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

and 'peace with honour'.³⁴ Neutralisation was another of these strategies, and it was proposed in 1961 mainly by members inside the administration and only occasionally by the South Vietnamese themselves. That changed beginning in 1963, as American involvement in Vietnam intensified. There were still a few voices in Washington advocating neutralisation, but the issue was now mainly raised in South Vietnam itself. However, it was also taken up by the French and a few leading American journalists.

Before looking at the two periods in detail, it is important to summarise the situation in Vietnam prior to JFK's first major decision. In contrast to Laos, where the Geneva Accords of 1954 did not permit the stationing of foreign military advisers, South Vietnam was allowed a contingent of 685 men. Originally these were French troops, but by 1956 the American military had replaced them. From then on, a regular US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was stationed in the country. When the Kennedy Administration came to office there were exactly 685 advisers in place. In May of the same year, Kennedy secretly added 500 Special Forces, and in doing so he broke the Geneva Accords.³⁵

During the summer, the South Vietnamese army lost further ground, and by the fall the President was advised to send a large number of additional troops. In preparation for this decision JFK sent General Maxwell Taylor, his personal military adviser, to Vietnam to study the situation. Taylor, accompanied by Walt Rostow, left Washington on 15 October and returned on 25 October. Kennedy received the report on 3 November, and on 22 November decided to commit up to 8,000 additional troops to Vietnam.³⁶ This decision, it must be remembered, was made while the United States was negotiating the neutralisation of Laos at the Geneva Conference.

It was before, during, and after the Taylor Mission that neutrality was debated. The administration divided once more among lines familiar from the Laos discussion. The chief advocate of neutrality was again Chester Bowles. Several others voiced similar opinions, including Averell Harriman, who headed the Laos negotiating team in Geneva, Kenneth

³⁴ Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 225-51.

³⁵ Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 431; Biermann, *John F. Kennedy*, pp. 217-8; Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 78-9; *The Pentagon Papers*, as published by The New York Times (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), pp. 79-86.

³⁶ For personal commentaries, see Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 365-8; Walt W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power, An Essay in Recent History* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), pp. 274-6. For a telegram sent to the Department of State on October 25 containing a summary of the report to come, see *FRUS*, Vol. I (1961-3), pp. 427-9.

Galbraith, American Ambassador to India,³⁷ George W. Ball, and Senator Mike Mansfield. Each had his own argument, but they agreed that the Vietnam commitment was ill conceived and untenable, and that the United States headed for disaster.

Let us now look at some of the details. Two weeks before the Taylor Mission departed, Chester Bowles sent a memorandum to Dean Rusk, his superior. This time he did not insist upon comparing the situation to Korea. Instead he outlined an alternative, arguing in favour of expanding the concept of a neutral and independent Laos to embrace an entire 'neutral Southeast Asian belt.' The area would include Laos, Burma, Thailand, South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Malaya, and the arrangement would have to be guaranteed by the USSR, China, India, Japan, and the SEATO powers.³⁸

The sticking point was Thailand, because the country was a SEATO member, and the hard-liners were absolutely unwilling to let that 'domino' fall. Bowles disagreed, however, and because his argument went to the core of several contested issues, it is worth examining:

For centuries successive generations of Thais have prided themselves on their ability to assure their security by skilled negotiation. Each powerful new Chinese dynasty in its turn has brought pressure to bear on Thailand, and on each occasion the Thais have managed to preserve their sovereignty by paying some form of political tribute. In the last part of the 19th century and the early part of this one, the Thais played the French against the British. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the Thai response was promptly to declare war on the United States the following day.³⁹

Bowles saw the war in Southeast Asia as another manifestation of Chinese dynastic expansion limited to its traditional sphere of influence. His opponents disagreed. For them the conflict was not traditional and limited but modern, ideological, and universal. The disagreement between Bowles and most top advisers was therefore profound.

In order to discuss these serious differences, Bowles asked Rusk to arrange a meeting with George Ball, Averell Harriman, and Under Secretary of State Alexis Johnson, but there is no

³⁷ *FRUS*, Vol. I (1961-3), pp. 474-6.

³⁸ According to Bowles, it was not the first time Rusk heard of the idea. Bowles had presented it to him in February and had also talked to Kennedy about it right after the election; see Bowles, *Promises to Keep*, p. 407-9.

³⁹ *FRUS*, Vol. I (1961-3), p. 323.

record that it took place or that the memorandum was ever answered.⁴⁰ Bowles claims in his memoirs that his recommendations were 'vigorously debated' in the Department and the White House.⁴¹ Perhaps, but there is no record of a meeting among top decision-makers at which neutrality was seriously discussed. The debates must have been informal.

On 2 November, a week after Taylor and Rostow had returned from Vietnam, Senator Mansfield sent the President a lengthy letter. The mission report had not yet been transmitted to the President, but the more essential recommendations had come to Mansfield's attention. Although he did not mention neutrality, the Senator questioned the wisdom of an increased American commitment. Like Bowles, he warned of a second Korea. 'In present circumstances,' he argued, 'it seems to me we must exercise every caution to avoid another Korean-type involvement on the Asian mainland.' Alluding to the tensions between Moscow and China, Mansfield argued that 'such an involvement would appear to me to play completely into the hands of the Soviet Union, since it will get them off their present Chinese ideological hook... .' As Bowles continued to argue, the United States should keep out of the traditional Chinese sphere of influence, and its over-all strategy should therefore resemble that of World War II 'to minimise our involvement, particularly military, on the Asian mainland, not to maximise it.'⁴²

After Mansfield it was Bowles' turn again. On 5 November, Prime Minister Lawaharlal Nehru visited Washington. A folder prepared for the occasion by the Department of State contained a memorandum addressed to President Kennedy in which Bowles argued again in favour of a neutral Southeast Asia.⁴³ This time Bowles also received the support of Kenneth Galbraith, the American Ambassador to India.⁴⁴ George Ball was active at the same time. He spoke to the President on 7 November, and his words proved to be prophetic:

Within five years we'll have three hundred thousand men in the paddies and jungles and never find them again. That was the French experience. Vietnam is the worst possible terrain both from a physical and a political point of view.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 325 (note by the editors); Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 81-2.

⁴¹ Bowles, *Promises to Keep*, p. 409.

⁴² *FRUS*, Vol. I (1961-3), pp. 468-70.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 540-1.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 474-6. See also Biermann, *John F. Kennedy*, p. 227.

⁴⁵ Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 366.

To Ball's chagrin Kennedy was unwilling to discuss the matter. Lyndon Baines Johnson would be different. As President he at least pretended to listen to Ball.

Taylor's final mission report covered 50 pages and was sent to the President on 3 November, two days before the Nehru visit.⁴⁶ In anticipation of the pending decision, the Secretaries of State and of Defense, together with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sent a memorandum to the President on 8 November. In it they urged JFK to 'take the decision to commit ourselves to the objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism and the willingness to commit whatever United States combat forces may be necessary to achieve this objective.'⁴⁷ As indicated, the President decided to commit on 22 November and, among other things, agreed to raise the number of American troops from 1,100 to a maximum of 8,000.⁴⁸

Dean Rusk was not surprised. As he comments in his memoirs, 'John Kennedy never questioned that Southeast Asia was vital to American security. His only question: Where should we fight if we had to fight? His decision: South Vietnam.'⁴⁹ Laos was the wrong place but, as Rusk confided privately to French Ambassador Hervé Alphand two days after the decision was taken, Laos was to him also a 'bad precedent.'⁵⁰

If Kennedy wanted to consider the option of neutralising Vietnam he had an opportunity to do so – but he did nothing to encourage a serious and formal discussion.⁵¹ He was willing to test neutrality in Laos but had no intention of applying it to Vietnam or, more cogently, it was because of his flexibility in Laos that JFK felt impelled to be inflexible in Vietnam.⁵² The military leg of Rusk's two-track therefore extended to Vietnam; while negotiating at the Geneva Conference the President intended to demonstrate determination and strength in Vietnam. This showed in the fact that JFK wanted the Laotian Task Force to be run by the Department of State, while he assigned the Vietnam Task Force to the Department of

⁴⁶ *FRUS*, Vol. I (1961-3), pp. 477-532.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 564.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 591-4; see also Biermann, *John F. Kennedy*, p. 234.

⁴⁹ Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 430.

⁵⁰ *FRUS*, Vol. I (1961-3), p. 585.

⁵¹ Next to Bowles, Galbraith, and Ball, Senator Mansfield was also active; see *FRUS*, Vol. I (1961-3), pp. 467-70.

⁵² Pentagon Papers, p. 87; Herring, *Longest War*, p. 77.

Defense. Choosing hard-liners like Taylor and Rostow to visit Vietnam was further evidence of the President's desire to differentiate between the two cases.⁵³

Kennedy's desire to take a hard line in Vietnam was most certainly related to the otherwise meagre foreign policy performance during his first year in office. The Bay of Pigs invasion was a disaster, the Vienna meeting with Khrushchev in June was a disappointment, and the construction of the Berlin Wall in August caught Washington by surprise. It seemed time to take a strong stand and to follow Taylor's recommendations.

Chester Bowles did not give up. On 30 November, he sent the President another memo,⁵⁴ and on 18 July 1962, just a few days before the closing of the Geneva Conference, Bowles made a last-ditch effort. He drafted a 'Peace Charter for Southeast Asia' and wanted to tour the Far Eastern US embassies to muster support for his idea. At first Rusk and the President approved the mission, but upon the resistance of the Far Eastern Bureau it was stopped.⁵⁵ In early March 1963, Bowles was appointed Ambassador to India, and immediately thereafter he sent one more memo to the President – without ever getting an answer.⁵⁶ This cold-shouldering combined with Bowles' transfer was a clear signal that neutralist New Delhi was a better place for an American proponent of neutralism than Washington, D.C.

1961 had been an important year. JFK arrived quickly at two decisions affecting Southeast Asia and neutrality. They were largely his initiatives, and there were as yet few neutralisation pressures from outside the administration. As we have seen, however, that did not last. As the United States became more deeply involved in South Vietnam, the pressures from within that country increased. Others also joined in the demand for neutralisation, especially the French and some members of the American press. To the extent that Kennedy increased the American presence in South Vietnam, the neutrality pressures to come were partly of his own making. A vicious circle had been set in motion.

⁵³ Frederick Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy* (New York: Praeger, 1988), pp. 12, 15-6.

⁵⁴ *FRUS*, Vol. I (1961-3), pp. 700-1.

⁵⁵ Bowles, *Promises to Keep*, pp. 410-7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

4 Neutralist Diem?

Symbolic of the mounting internal problems in South Vietnam was Diem's assassination in early November 1963, only a few weeks before Kennedy himself was shot in Dallas. The story of Diem's removal is well documented, and it is clear that the United States was heavily involved. There were many reasons why Washington had become unhappy with his rule, but two stand out as the most important: one had to do with Diem's domestic political problems, the other with his secret contacts to the North.⁵⁷

In May and August of 1963, there were two violent clashes between Diem's troops and Buddhists in Saigon. In the first incident eight civilians were killed, whereupon a monk immolated himself publicly, a picture that sent shock waves around the world. In the second incident forces commanded by Diem's brother Nhu sacked pagodas and arrested 1,400 monks.⁵⁸ The clashes were only the most obvious expression of great domestic difficulties and of the fact that the war was not going well. In Washington there was a growing consensus that Diem himself was becoming part of the problem.

There was particular unhappiness with his younger brother Nhu, who was reported to be involved in various questionable schemes. Most disturbingly, however, there was clear evidence that Nhu and Diem were exploring a deal with the North and possibly opting for a neutralist solution. Washington was alarmed, and so were some South Vietnamese generals. By August 1963, there were plans to oust Diem, of which John F. Kennedy himself was fully informed. On 24 August, he personally gave the generals the go-ahead, but the coup did not come off at this time.⁵⁹

France got wind of Diem's contacts with the North and of the plans for a coup,⁶⁰ and on 29 August Charles de Gaulle reacted. He issued a brief, four-paragraph statement on Vietnam. The words were part of a message to the French Council of Ministers and appeared in the press two days later.⁶¹ De Gaulle stated that France wished to see the people of Vietnam

⁵⁷ Pentagon Papers, pp. 158-90; Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 94-8, 101.

⁵⁸ Biermann, *John F. Kennedy*, p. 249-52; Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 370.

⁵⁹ McNamara, *In Retrospect, The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1985), pp. 51-62; Rusk, *As I Saw It*, pp. 436-41; Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 371-4.

⁶⁰ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 51; for a CIA information on this point see *FRUS*, Vol. IV (1961-3), p. 89.

⁶¹ *Le Monde*, 31 August 1963, p. 2.

regain their national unity and independence. And he added: 'Naturally it is up to this people, and to them alone, to choose the means of achieving it, but any national effort that would be carried out in Vietnam would find France ready... to establish cordial co-operation with this country.'⁶² The press interpreted the statement as encouraging the South Vietnamese to seek a settlement with the North – with French help and without American interference.

Predictably, Washington was irritated.⁶³ Even though de Gaulle did not mention neutrality, it seemed to be implied. This was confirmed when on 30 August Alphand was received by Dean Rusk. The French Ambassador thought that a neutral solution for Vietnam was possible, because of disagreement between Moscow, Peking, and Hanoi. Mao, Alphand argued, was for a continuation of the war, while Ho and the Soviets had their doubts about Chinese intentions.⁶⁴

De Gaulle's brief statement launched a new debate on neutralisation inside the US government but also in public. On 2 September Walter Cronkite of CBS interviewed the President at Hyannis Port. When asked how he assessed de Gaulle's remarks, JFK could not hide his displeasure:

What, of course, makes Americans somewhat impatient is that after carrying this load for 18 years, we are glad to get counsel, but we would like a little more assistance, real assistance. But we are going to meet our responsibility anyway. It doesn't do any good to say, 'Well, why don't we all just go home and leave the world to those who are our enemies.' General de Gaulle is not our enemy. He is our friend and candid friend – and, there, sometimes difficult – but he is not the object of our hostility.⁶⁵

The next day Walter Lippmann wrote a column in which he supported de Gaulle's position and explicitly mentioned neutrality. Lippmann added, 'if there is no settlement such as General de Gaulle proposes, then a protracted and indecisive war of attrition is all that is left.'⁶⁶ JFK learned about the column, and in a conference held the same day with some of his top decision-makers, he wondered why Walter Lippmann had suggested that the Laotian case

⁶² *FRUS*, Vol. IV (1961-3), p. 55.

⁶³ *Le Monde*, 1-2 September 1963, p. 2.

⁶⁴ *FRUS*, Vol. IV (1961-3), pp. 60-1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94. For background material relating to the interview, see *FRUS*, Vol. IV (1961-3), pp. 81-8.

⁶⁶ *The Washington Post*, 3 September 1963 (Column: "Today and Tomorrow...")

provided an illustration of what should be done in Vietnam.⁶⁷ By the fall of 1963, it was obvious that Laotian neutralisation did not work.⁶⁸

The situation in Vietnam became increasingly worrisome, and toward the end of September Kennedy sent General Taylor on another mission, this time in the company of Secretary McNamara. On 2 October, the two submitted a report in which they concluded that despite a deteriorating political situation there was much progress on the military front. They anticipated completing the major part of the task by 1965 and completely withdrawing all U.S. forces by early 1966!⁶⁹

This optimistic appraisal motivated Henry Cabot Lodge, the American Ambassador in Saigon, to submit to Washington a plan for the possible neutralisation of North Vietnam (!) once the Americans had left the South. Lodge looked for 'a militantly anti-Communist SVN with a Yugoslavia-like neutralist nation to the north.' He also added, 'the neutralisation of NVN might be attractive to the Soviet Union, as counterbalancing the ChiCom influence in Albania. Our reputation among Communists for impatience and impulsiveness might make our proposal plausible to a North Viet-Nam official who is looking for something with which to counter ChiCom hegemony.'⁷⁰ Here was a neutralisation plan proposing not to abandon Southeast Asia, not even to "hold the line" – but to move the line *forward*. Lodge explicitly stated that the plan 'aims at a ChiCom rollback.'

While Lodge was developing this rather absurd scenario, a handful of South Vietnamese generals once more plotted Diem's ouster, again with the full knowledge of the highest levels in Washington. On 2 November, Diem was assassinated. The United States could only hope that the putschists would in the future handle the Buddhists more intelligently, be more amenable to American demands, and stay away from negotiating with the NLF. As it turned out, that was but a hopeful wish.

On November 22, Kennedy himself was killed, and his successor inherited a difficult situation. In Laos neutralisation had been attempted and had failed. For Vietnam

⁶⁷ *FRUS*, Vol. IV (1961-3), p. 100.

⁶⁸ Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 434.

⁶⁹ Biermann, *John F. Kennedy*, pp. 256-7.

⁷⁰ *FRUS*, Vol. IV (1961-3), pp. 656-8.

neutralisation was ruled out from the beginning, but the military and political results were no better than in Laos. Given these setbacks, should JFK not have listened seriously to those who recommended 'redrawing the line' through neutralisation? In his memoirs Robert McNamara thinks that opportunities to do so were missed:

In retrospect, we erred seriously in not even exploring the neutralization option. If a sophisticated statesman like de Gaulle thought it desirable, it at least deserved close attention... If France – a charter member of SEATO and a prime beneficiary of America's security guarantee to NATO – thought a neutralized Vietnam would not seriously weaken NATO or Western security, then we should, at a minimum, have fully debated the issue. We did not.⁷¹

Kennedy could not fully consider neutralisation as long as he saw it as just another instrument to contain Communism. That expectation was realistic in the case of Austria but illusory in Southeast Asia. As Dulles had argued in 1956, the reasons were domestic: Austrian neutralisation built on a stable pro-Western government and not on a shaky neutralist coalition or worse, a civil war. Given the domestic instability of Laos and Vietnam, neutralisation could only mean 'redrawing the line,' and that Kennedy was unwilling to consider. When there were signs that Diem and Nhu might be willing to negotiate 'the line,' Kennedy ruthlessly eliminated them. In such an atmosphere it was unthinkable that neutralisation proposals, whether they emanated from his advisers or from de Gaulle, would be seriously debated.

Whether Kennedy would have reconsidered his policy after a successful re-election in 1964 remains an open question. According to some sources he planned to do so, but we will never know for sure.⁷² We do know, however, that the assassination of Diem was a watershed in the American Vietnam involvement. Highest-level approval of Diem's elimination in order to achieve American goals created an atmosphere that was not conducive to a fundamental reorientation of policy. If Kennedy indeed intended to pull out of Vietnam, he sent the wrong messages to the generals in Saigon, to his senior advisers at home and, as I will show later on, to Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia. As McNamara concedes in his memoirs, 'before

⁷¹ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 62; Pentagon Papers, p. 158; Herring, *Longest War*, p. 101.

⁷² According to Dean Rusk, both Kenneth O. Donnell and Mike Mansfield claimed that Kennedy spoke to them about planning to withdraw following the election of 1964; see Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 441; see also Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 441-2.

authorizing the coup against Diem, we failed to confront the basic issues in Vietnam that ultimately led to his overthrow, and we continued to ignore them after his removal.⁷³

5 Neutralist Generals?

It was now Lyndon Baines Johnson who faced an election in 1964. In order to optimise his chances he decided to operate quietly. Dramatic Vietnam decisions were to be avoided at all cost. When he came to office there were 16,000 troops in Vietnam, and over the next year LBJ almost imperceptibly sent another 7,000.⁷⁴ Domestic politics had priority, and foreign policy was not meant to interfere. Given this atmosphere, few top aides wanted to raise the topic of neutralisation and, as became evident between 1964 and 1965, the neutralisation idea now had its origins mostly within South Vietnam.

Generals Minh and Khanh, who each headed the government for a time during those two years, were suspected of harbouring neutralist sympathies. The reasons were domestic since, like Diem, they walked a political tightrope. The Americans had clear expectations as to how they should run the government and the war, but at the same time the generals were not supposed to be unduly authoritarian and were expected to somehow get along with the Buddhists. The latter chiefly wanted peace and democratic representation, and officially the United States also stood for both. Yet a freely elected government would have been under great pressure to end the fighting by negotiating a political settlement with the NLF. As Emmet John Hughes of *Newsweek* is said to have commented: 'If any elected assembly sits in Saigon, it will be on the phone negotiating with Hanoi within one week'.⁷⁵

There was no elected assembly under General Minh, and yet within less than two months senior Washington policymakers were disappointed with his performance. When it came to running the war, Minh immediately encountered a number of difficulties with the United States. There were disagreements over the strategic hamlet program, the role and number of American military advisers, and, most importantly, the possible bombing of North Vietnam. But more alarming 'was the possibility that they might negotiate a "neutralist" solution involving an end to the fighting and a compromise agreement with the National Liberation

⁷³ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 70.

⁷⁴ Pentagon Papers, p. 83; Herring, *Longest War*, p. 116.

⁷⁵ Cited in George McT. Kahin, *Intervention, How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p. 416.

Front.⁷⁶ Contact with the NLF was not difficult. Minh and other top generals came from Buddhist families, and Minh's brother belonged to the NLF.

On 26 November 1963, only three weeks after Minh had removed Diem, Norodom Sihanouk called publicly for the convening of a 14-Nation Conference to neutralise Cambodia. The Johnson Administration was divided on the issue and, as will be seen in more detail below, remained undecided for two entire years. Opponents worried that a favourable reaction would rekindle talk about Vietnamese neutralisation. But the very fact that Washington was arguing back and forth gave the Vietnamese generals the impression that Washington itself might harbour neutralist plans! It was a veritable dilemma, and some administration members once more suspected the French of standing behind the Cambodian move. Rumour also had it that de Gaulle intended to establish diplomatic relations with China. That seemed to confirm the worst of suspicions.

The problem was compounded when on 10 December Walter Lippmann supported the Cambodian proposal and James Reston of the *New York Times* voiced similar ideas.⁷⁷ Rusk reacted immediately. In order to reassure the generals, Rusk cabled to Lodge in Saigon, instructing him to denounce the ideas launched by 'powerful voices' in the press.⁷⁸

In an end-of-the-year report sent to Washington by the embassy, the confusion in Saigon was described in vivid terms:

Talk of neutralism has spread like wildfire through the Vietnamese community. The *N.Y. Times* editorial and Reston and Lippmann columns on the subject were a body blow to morale in Saigon. The equivocal U.S. stand regarding a conference on Cambodian neutrality took on ominous meaning for many Vietnamese. Even high officials asked: are we next? Rumors of French recognition of the Peiping regime added fuel to the flames. The withdrawal of some forces this month and the suggestion we might pull most of our troops out by the end of 1965 were read by some, however mistakenly, as forerunners of a sharp reduction in our commitment.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 182; Herring, *Longest War*, p. 111.

⁷⁷ Reston had recently begun questioning US policy in Vietnam; see *New York Times*, 6 November 1963, p. 40, 8 November 1963, p. 8.

⁷⁸ *FRUS*, Vol. IV (1961-3), p. 695.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 754.

Senator Mansfield was active, too. He was scheduled for a talk with the President in early January 1964, and in preparation for the encounter Secretary McNamara sent Johnson a memorandum containing a list of five anti-neutralist arguments. It is uncertain whether the President conveyed McNamara's ideas to the Majority Leader, but if he did, Mansfield heard nothing new. According to the Secretary of Defense, the war was principally a South Vietnamese responsibility (point 1); it could still be won (point 2); neutralising the country would mean a Communist-dominated government in Saigon (point 3); the consequences would be dire for Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Burma, a truly neutral Southeast Asia would not emerge, and the US capacity to deal with wars of national liberation would be in doubt (point 4); the stakes in preserving an anti-Communist South Vietnam were so high that the United States had to extend every effort to win (point 5).⁸⁰

On 25 January, France announced that it would establish diplomatic relations with China. In commenting the decision, de Gaulle argued that no issue of war or peace in Asia could be settled without China. He added that 'it would be absolutely impossible to envision, without China, a possible neutrality agreement relating to the Southeast Asian States.'⁸¹ In Washington this set off another wave of neutrality worries that lasted for several months. And in what had become the normal course, much of the trouble originated in South Vietnam itself.

Four days after de Gaulle's announcement, and after just two months in power, Minh was ousted by fellow officers. The new strongman was General Khanh, and he justified the coup, among other things, by claiming that Minh and his friends were pro-French and pro-neutralist.⁸² The Johnson Administration immediately accepted the displacement of Minh, and until late summer Washington was generally pleased with Khanh's performance.

In early July, General Maxwell Taylor replaced Henry Cabot Lodge as Ambassador. This was a sure sign that more military action was in store. Another signal pointing in the same direction was the retaliatory air strike following the Tonkin Gulf 'incident.' As we know today, LBJ used the minor naval clash to obtain a congressional resolution permitting the executive to pursue the Vietnam War as it saw fit.⁸³ But the Tonkin Gulf Resolution also

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 12-13; see also Kahin, *Intervention*, pp. 190-1; Herring, *Longest War*, p. 115.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 49.

⁸² Kahin, *Intervention*, pp. 197-8.

⁸³ Pentagon Papers, pp. 234-70; Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 118-23.

served two short-term purposes. At home it undercut Goldwater's claim that Johnson was 'soft on Communism,' and in South Vietnam it helped to shore up Khanh's government. But Khanh increasingly came to face the same dilemma as his predecessor. In order to step up the war he had to broaden his political base, but that meant negotiating Buddhist demands. This in turn made him vulnerable to neutralist charges and also worried the Americans, who wanted to step up the war. This was the vicious circle all over again.⁸⁴

George Ball was disappointed with Congress. He had expected that the legislative would insert qualifying language into the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and feared that now things might really get out of hand. He began to draft a voluminous memorandum that he finished in early October. One of the options he outlined one dealt with air warfare:

We could mount an air offensive against the North to improve our bargaining position for negotiation. But though preferable to a ground force commitment, that would lead to the same result by provoking the North Vietnamese to send ground forces to the South that could be effectively countered only by United States ground forces.⁸⁵

Once again, his prognostics were correct. The top advisers were indeed planning a massive air assault on North Vietnam and were working hard to get the President's approval.⁸⁶ In October, with LBJ's landslide victory over Goldwater in sight, Ball submitted the paper to Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Dean Rusk and requested a meeting. They met on 7 November, but disagreement was total. There was no point-by-point discussion that Ball had hoped to provoke. The greatest worry was the prevention of a possible leak. Ball's paper never reached the President.⁸⁷

Johnson won the largest electoral mandate in recent history and could have taken new initiatives in foreign policy had he so desired. Various polls showed that up to 75 percent of the American public favoured negotiations to settle the war in Vietnam.⁸⁸ Why not let a neutralist government come to power in South Vietnam and politely bow out? Why not let the neutralists in Saigon get onto the Sihanouk bandwagon and blame the local politicians? This

⁸⁴ Kahin, *Intervention*, pp. 234-6, 238.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 381.

⁸⁶ Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 126-8.

⁸⁷ Kahin, *Intervention*, pp. 241-3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 289-90.

was the last chance to extricate the United States from the war, but LBJ's senior advisers wanted to stay in. They stepped up their efforts to obtain the President's approval for air warfare. Johnson set conditions, however, and the most important was the existence of a stable government in Saigon. Yet Khanh still faced the same dilemma, and now it was becoming more pronounced as the Americans seriously considered the bombing of the North. There were even reports that Khanh, too, was contemplating a neutralist solution!

On 7 February, the Viet Cong attacked a poorly guarded US helicopter base and advisers' barracks at Pleiku. Eight Americans were killed, 126 wounded, and 10 planes destroyed. The incident provided the administration with the opportunity to start the first phase of its bombing program (Flaming Dart), and on 23 February the second phase was unleashed (Rolling Thunder).⁸⁹

However, there was still no stable government in Saigon, and there was now conclusive evidence that Khanh, like Minh before him, was negotiating seriously with the Buddhists and testing a neutralist arrangement. In order to meet the President's demand, General Westmoreland and Ambassador Taylor decided the time was ripe for a new government. Luckily they managed to convince Khanh that his situation was hopeless and that he should quit unceremoniously. On 24 February, Khan left South Vietnam as Saigon's 'roving ambassador.' The new government was headed by generals Ky and Thieu.⁹⁰ On 8 March, the first Marines landed in South Vietnam and were quickly followed by 40,000 additional troops. All told there were now 75,000 American troops in the country, and there were more to come. On 28 July the Administration announced the dispatching of another 50,000 men and a massive stepping up of the military draft. As NSC records reveal, the President was in fact ready to send 100,000 troops.⁹¹ It was now most definitely an American war.

The Vietnamese population began to accept the inevitable and accommodated itself to the massive American presence. As a consequence, the middle ground that the Buddhists had attempted to occupy between the South Vietnamese military and the NLF was eroding. The

⁸⁹ Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 128-44.

⁹⁰ Kahin, *Intervention*, pp. 294, 303-4.

⁹¹ The National Security Council met three times in one week, on 21, 22 and 27 July; see *FRUS*, Vol. III (1964-8), pp. 189-204, 209-20, 260-3.

vicious circle was broken, and from now on the generals in Saigon and the decision-makers in Washington had fewer worries about South Vietnamese neutralism.

6 Cambodian ‘Sideshow’

Like Laos, Cambodia was not central to the conduct of the Vietnam War, but as William Shawcross puts it, it was an important sideshow. Seen from an American perspective, relations with Cambodia at that time went through three different phases. From 1954 to 1965, when Sihanouk broke with the United States, the sideshow was mostly peaceful, but that changed with the massive introduction of American forces into Vietnam in 1965. From then on the sideshow assumed an increasingly military and warlike dimension, culminating in Nixon's secret bombardment of 1969, Sihanouk's ouster in 1970, and the massive 'incursion' of the same year. That initiated the third and truly tragic phase, in the course of which Pol Pot fought his way to Phnom Penh and installed a regime that committed genocide on its own people.

The story of the Cambodian tragedy has been told by several authors.⁹² In order to gain an understanding of the American conception of Cambodian neutrality it is sufficient to cover the years from 1962 to 1965, when Sihanouk lobbied for the convening of an international conference guaranteeing Cambodian neutrality and territorial integrity. That effort failed definitively when the Johnson Administration decided to commit massive American forces to South Vietnam. As already indicated, this meant the end of an American interest in neutralisation – if such an interest had existed at all.

War was not new to the Cambodian people. Their experience with neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam had long been unhappy. Norodom Sihanouk, like most Cambodians, suspected the Thais and Vietnamese of wanting to further divide and subjugate Cambodia. This was evident in the fact that many of Cambodia's frontiers were being disputed. Since Cambodia was too weak to confront its neighbours directly and alone, the country had a vital interest in influencing them indirectly via the larger world powers. In the 1960s this meant that the

⁹² David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History, Politics, War, and Revolution since 1945* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1991); William Shawcross, *Sideshow, Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979); Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor, Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk, Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

Chinese and Soviets should have used their influence to hold back the North Vietnamese, whereas the United States should have applied its weight to rein in the Thais and the South Vietnamese.

This assumed a degree of moderation among the great powers themselves, but in the Cold War the opposite was true. Instead of restraining their local allies, the great powers used them as proxies to promote their own interests – and in Southeast Asia these were antagonistic. Sihanouk could only hope that despite their profound ideological enmity, the Soviets, China, and the United States would show some understanding for Cambodia's desperate situation, but little was forthcoming. Peking and Moscow showed only verbal sympathy for his neutral balancing act, and Washington found it difficult to do even that. US Ambassador William Trimble summed up the situation neatly in a report to the Department of State dated May 3, 1961:

Cambodian neutrality predicated on balance between major world camps. Without such equilibrium, Cambodians believe neutrality impossible, implying accommodation in that case necessary with winning side. Sihanouk, who formulates Cambodian policy, has expressed conviction that eventual Communist hegemony over world inevitable and in particular that ChiComs 'wave of future' in SEA. However so long as free world power counterbalances bloc, neutrality a viable policy.⁹³

Trimble had a working relation with Sihanouk, but he left Phnom Penh in the fall of 1962. After that no influential member of the American administration showed much understanding for Cambodia's dilemma.⁹⁴

As the war in Vietnam escalated, Sihanouk turned increasingly to the Soviet Union and China but, as it turned out, with little or no success. In the end he and his country were sacrificed by all the major powers. Sihanouk's desperation was revealed clearly in his three attempts to organise an international conference guaranteeing Cambodia's neutrality and territorial integrity. He failed, because none of the great powers was truly behind the idea, but the effort illustrates the specifically American attitude toward Cambodia and toward neutrality.

⁹³ *FRUS*, Vol. XXIII (1961-3), p. 148.

⁹⁴ For a general discussion of Sihanouk's relations with the United States from 1954 to 1962, see Kenton J. Clymer, 'The Perils of Neutrality: The Break in U.S.-Cambodian Relations, 1965', in *DIPLOMATIC HISTORY*, Vol. 23/4, Fall 1999, pp. 613-5.

The first attempt lasted for about a year, from August 1962 to July of 1963. Sihanouk announced his plans on 20 August 1962, barely a month after the successful conclusion of the Geneva Conference guaranteeing Laotian neutrality.⁹⁵ He stated explicitly that he wanted a similar arrangement, a guarantee of Cambodian neutrality and of its frontiers. Dean Rusk, worried about Thai reactions, immediately sent a cable to the embassy in Bangkok stating unambiguously that he was opposed to the conference mainly because it was likely to 'encourage extension of conference concept to South Viet-Nam.'⁹⁶ In a conversation with French Ambassador Alphan in November, Rusk became more specific. He left no doubt about his dislike for guaranteeing neutrality and for discussing disputed frontiers, but what displeased him most was the fact that the plan was aimed against the Thais and the South Vietnamese. This made it difficult for the United States, since 'we are allied with the former under SEATO and heavily engaged with the latter in their struggle for survival.'⁹⁷ Members of the NSC staff expressed identical views.⁹⁸

Also in November, the new US Ambassador in Phnom Penh, Philip Sprouse, sent three long telegrams to Washington explaining the Cambodian situation, but he stopped short of endorsing the neutralisation plan. He recommended that the United States should co-ordinate its reaction with that of its Western Allies, avoid outright rejection, and consider possible alternatives.⁹⁹ This recommendation led to the drafting of a proposal by the office of the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, headed by Averell Harriman. It was sent to Dean Rusk on 23 January 1963 in the hope that it would not only meet American requirements 'but be acceptable to the Thai and Vietnamese and hopefully also to Sihanouk.'¹⁰⁰

Although JFK had promised Sihanouk in writing that the American government would give the matter 'urgent attention,'¹⁰¹ nothing came of Harriman's draft proposal. When for months

⁹⁵ For the complete text of Sihanouk's letter to JFK, see AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY, CURRENT DOCUMENTS, 1962, Parts 8-14, pp. 1002-3; see also Clymer, 'The Perils of Neutrality', p. 617.

⁹⁶ *FRUS*, Vol. XXIII (1961-3), p. 199.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 225-6.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 218-9.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 224; see also AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY, CURRENT DOCUMENTS, 1962, Parts 8-14, pp. 1003-4.

Washington did not respond, Ambassador Sprouse sent another lengthy message to the Department in May 1963 in which he politely pointed out that except for a Christmas card, no presidential message had been sent to Sihanouk in almost half a year.¹⁰² But other governments also procrastinated, and on 1 July Sihanouk announced that his neutrality proposal had been shelved indefinitely.

The second attempt to launch the plan began in November of the same year and was accompanied by some rather dramatic circumstances. On 2 November, Diem was assassinated, and given Norodom Sihanouk's problematic experience with the CIA, he was frantic that the United States had similar plans in store for him. After all, he, too, was surrounded by generals with American sympathies.¹⁰³ To demonstrate his anti-Americanism he embarked on the nationalisation of banks and trading companies, thereby drastically curtailing business with the United States. Furthermore, Sihanouk threatened suspension of US commercial and military aid as well as the severing of diplomatic relations.¹⁰⁴ On 26 November, four days after the Kennedy assassination, the United States received official notice that Cambodia intended to reconvene the 14 Nation Geneva Conference.¹⁰⁵

The American reaction was almost identical: Once again the administration was split, and procrastination resulted.¹⁰⁶ Dean Rusk, however, had changed his mind. He now told the American embassy in Thailand that he favoured the conference for a number of reasons. He worried that if left alone, Cambodia's internal situation might deteriorate, that a failure to obtain some international statute might be followed by increased Cambodian reliance on the Eastern Bloc, and that there 'are considerable advantages in going to a conference and seeking to mould the result, rather than becoming isolated by refusing [to] participate and removing all restraint on Sihanouk.'¹⁰⁷ Apparently, Sihanouk's pressure tactics had produced some results.

¹⁰² *FRUS*, Vol. XXIII (1961-3), p. 234.

¹⁰³ Clymer, 'The Perils of Neutrality', p. 614; Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, p. 130; Shawcross, *Sideshow*, p. 60.

¹⁰⁴ Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, p. 130.

¹⁰⁵ *FRUS*, Vol. IV (1961-3), p. 641.

¹⁰⁶ Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, p. 135; Clymer, 'The Perils of Neutrality', p. 617.

¹⁰⁷ *FRUS*, Vol. XXIII (1961-3), p. 272; *FRUS*, Vol. IV (1961-3), pp. 695-6; Clymer, 'The Perils of Neutrality', p. 617.

It was now Henry Cabot Lodge in Saigon who opposed the plan most strenuously. He argued that the conference would be disastrous to the war effort in Vietnam, because it encouraged neutralism, promoted talk about unification with the North, and allowed the French to interfere.¹⁰⁸ In the face of such opposition Rusk decided to wait, and once again the US administration was incapable of reacting quickly and favourably.

By mid-February Sihanouk announced that if a conference were not called by May he would break off diplomatic relations with the United States and all of its allies.¹⁰⁹ In March demonstrators attacked the American embassy in Phnom Penh, and US-Cambodian relations took another turn for the worse.¹¹⁰ Washington still could not decide on the conference, and in the months to come, relations deteriorated further. In the wake of the Tonkin Gulf incident military activity in South Vietnam was stepped up, and Cambodian border violations became more frequent.

Having failed twice to get a conference by directly appealing to the 14 nations composing the Geneva group, Sihanouk decided to try the indirect route. He organised unilaterally a Conference of Indochinese Peoples in Phnom Penh. The gathering took place in mid-March of 1965 and issued a call for a larger, truly international conference on Cambodian neutrality.¹¹¹ As a result, Britain and the Soviet Union, the two co-chairmen of the 14 Nation Geneva Conference, once more contacted the United States, but the administration was still divided.¹¹²

Events then came to a head both in Phnom Penh and in Washington. On 23 April, Sihanouk accused the United States publicly of indecision and added that as matters now stood the idea of a conference was 'outdated.' This prompted Rusk to act, and on 25 April he finally announced American readiness to participate, together with Thailand and South Vietnam. The following day the US embassy in Phnom Penh was attacked for a second time within a year. Officially Sihanouk apologised, but he used the incident to announce on 3 May the

¹⁰⁸ *FRUS*, Vol. XXIII (1961-3), p. 277; *FRUS*, Vol. IV (1961-3) p. 697, 713.

¹⁰⁹ It was at about the same time that Sihanouk cut a secret deal with the North Vietnamese. He allowed them to use the Port of Sihanoukville to ship Chinese weapons to the NLF. As a quid pro quo the Cambodian army skimmed off 10% of the supplies: Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, p. 140; Shawcross, *Sideshow*, p. 64.

¹¹⁰ Clymer, 'The Perils of Neutrality', p. 617.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 622; Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, p. 145; Osborne, *Sihanouk*, p. 171.

¹¹² *FRUS*, Vol. II (1964-8), p. 572.

suspension of diplomatic relations. By the end of the month all US personnel had left Cambodia.¹¹³

The quick moves of both Rusk and Sihanouk require some explanation. It was suspected at the time, and documentary evidence confirms it today, that Sihanouk was under Chinese pressure to call off his project. Apparently it was Zhou Enlai personally who asked him to shelve the idea. As long as Washington stalled, the Chinese must have regarded the conference as a useful propaganda weapon, but once the United States responded favourably, Peking feared that the conference might increase Soviet influence over Hanoi and over the war in Vietnam.¹¹⁴

The reasons for the sudden American decision also had to do with the conduct of the war in Vietnam. By April 1965, the bombing of North Vietnam had been stepped up dramatically, and US troops were being committed in large numbers. The escalation was part of a carrot-and-stick strategy, or what experts also referred to as coercive diplomacy: While raising the ante, Hanoi would be told that the United States was ready to negotiate.

As a result Washington constantly reiterated its willingness for talks, but for a long time a multilateral neutralisation conference seemed to be the wrong instrument because of its negative effects on Thailand and South Vietnam. However, as the war escalated and the American commitment grew, the two Cambodian neighbours had fewer reasons to suspect the United States of seeking a neutralist solution, and they finally assented. Washington was pleased, because after the massive war efforts the conference would now provide an opportunity to sound out the North.

This idea was suggested by McGeorge Bundy, LBJ's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. In a memorandum summarising his conversation held with the President on 22 April he stated, 'we should accept the Cambodia Conference and transmit to Hanoi privately the word that we come prepared to discuss larger issues. The latter, of course, should not be said publicly. We do feel it important to let Hanoi know we are serious.'¹¹⁵ It also explains why Washington, after dragging its feet for nearly three years, held fast to the conference idea for

¹¹³ Clymer, 'The Perils of Neutrality', p. 609, 625-6.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 627; Osborne, *Sihanouk*, p. 171; *FRUS*, Vol. II (1964-8), p. 639.

¹¹⁵ *FRUS*, Vol. II (1964-8), p. 604; Clymer, 'The Perils of Neutrality', p. 625.

months after diplomatic relations had been broken off, and Sihanouk, together with the Chinese, had abandoned it. In secret direct contacts with the North the conference was mentioned as late as August and September.¹¹⁶

For years the United States had cared little about Cambodian neutrality. When it finally agreed to hold the conference it was not to reinforce Cambodian neutrality but to instrumentalise it for 'larger issues,' as Bundy told the President. The Cambodian sideshow had left its diplomatic and predominantly peaceful phase; from now on it became progressively military and tragic. The North Vietnamese were increasingly using Cambodian territory as a staging area, and border incidents became frequent. As Senator Mansfield told LBJ in December, the war was on the verge of involving Cambodia.¹¹⁷

Cambodia was spared direct and full involvement while Lyndon Baines Johnson was in office, but nevertheless the situation became increasingly desperate, internationally as well as nationally. The economic measures taken in November 1963 sent the economy into a tailspin, alienated the urban rich, and stimulated corruption. Domestic strife increased, and Sihanouk's position began to weaken. Against this background de Gaulle's four-day state visit in August 1966 was a spectacular but ineffective effort to improve Sihanouk's national and international standing.¹¹⁸ The elections held in September of that year were an expression of the Prince's declining fortunes. Sihanouk could not prevent his antagonists from entering Parliament, and to shore up his position he made General Lon Nol the new Prime Minister. This was one more indication of the increasing militarisation of politics.¹¹⁹

The evolving story is summed up well by David Chandler:

For the next three years Sihanouk, the urban élite, and the Cambodian left were engaged in mortal combat. Broadly, this period can be seen in terms of the left's ascendancy, the urban élite's increasing restlessness, and Sihanouk's decline.¹²⁰

By late 1967 there were indications that in his desperation Sihanouk was trying to mend his fences with the United States. Jackie Kennedy visited the country, and in January 1968,

¹¹⁶ *FRUS*, Vol. III (1964-8), pp. 328-32; Clymer, 'The Perils of Neutrality', pp. 626-7.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 649.

¹¹⁸ Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, pp. 150-3.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-8.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

Chester Bowles was sent from his post in New Delhi to see Sihanouk in Phnom Penh. The discussions led to the resumption of diplomatic relations in June of 1969, but Bowles' visit was important for yet another reason. At one point Sihanouk and Bowles discussed the fact that the Vietcong were operating from Cambodian soil and, according to notes taken by members of the American delegation, the Prince, in a reversal of earlier pronouncements, indicated that he would not object to American hot pursuit in unpopulated areas. Years later, this remark was used by Henry Kissinger to justify the large-scale secret bombing of Cambodia that he and Nixon decided on in 1969. It was a desperate attempt at justification, and a twisting of facts. There is no doubt whatsoever that Sihanouk and Bowles had not mentioned massive and prolonged bombing but had spoken of small-scale ground operations.¹²¹

1968 was also the year that Pol Pot launched the struggle in northwestern Cambodia that led to his conquest in 1975. Furthermore, another successful Tet offensive shattered Washington's expectations that 'the end of the tunnel' was in sight. As a result, LBJ decided in the spring not to run for a second term. In November, Richard Nixon won the elections, and Henry Kissinger became his personal national security adviser. As one of their first foreign policy acts, the two decided to secretly bomb the border areas of Cambodia.¹²²

In June, while the bombing was taking its course, Cambodia re-established diplomatic relations with the United States, but the bombing encouraged pro-American Cambodians to further undermine Sihanouk's position. He left the country in January 1970, and, before his planned return in March, he was ousted by his cousin Prince Sirik Matak, in co-operation with General Lon Nol. Whether the United States played an instrumental role in the coup, as was the case in Vietnam when Diem was deposed, is still uncertain.¹²³ Whatever the exact link, it was only shortly afterwards that Nixon decided to invade Cambodia on the ground. The country's sovereignty and neutrality was now violated massively by both sides of the Vietnam War.¹²⁴ It took the Khmer Rouge another five years to reach their goal but, as Kenton J.

¹²¹ Shawcross, *Sideshow*, pp. 68-71; Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, pp. 172-3.

¹²² *Ibid.*, pp. 80-4.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-23; Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, pp. 192-9.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-49.

Clymer remarks, 'had the United States and Cambodia been able to resolve their differences constructively, Cambodia might have been spared the holocaust it endured.'¹²⁵

The fates of all three countries of former French Indochina were tragic, but that of Cambodia surpassed them all. Norodom Sihanouk was correct in his view that neutrality was the only conceivable alternative, but given the confrontation between Washington and Hanoi, neutrality had no chance. This was true for Laos and South Vietnam. As I argued above, the reasons for this failure did not lie primarily in a false understanding of neutrality, but rather in over-all foreign policy conceptions that, as we know today, turned out to be mistaken both on the North Vietnamese and the American sides.

The situation in Europe had been very different. In ideological terms the Cold War was as bitter in Europe as it was in Asia, but the two sides, however precariously, managed to stabilise the confrontation by respecting their respective zones of influence. The two Berlin crises and the Hungarian Revolution are evidence of this fact. In Southeast Asia such an arrangement was lacking, and the situation was more complex. In Europe the clash was bipolar. The NATO countries confronted those of the Warsaw Pact or, more precisely, the United States faced the Soviet Union. In Southeast Asia the constellation was multipolar: Besides the Soviet Union and the United States, China was a factor as well, and that complicated matters.

Tripolarity meant less discipline, and this showed in that fact that neither Moscow nor Peking had real control over the North Vietnamese. In fact, for many years Hanoi managed to play the two Communist powers off against each other while obtaining the necessary assistance to carry on the war. Much more so than the Americans calculated, Hanoi had its own foreign policy agenda and was in fact a 'loose gun.' Equally troublesome, however, was the difficulty that all the powers had in figuring out China. No one seemed to be quite sure what Mao's foreign policy aims were and how they related to the ongoing Cultural Revolution. The inscrutability of China was an additional factor complicating multipolarity, and for the United States this turned out to be decisive. A different assessment of China would have entailed a different definition of American security interests in the area, and it might also have led to another conception of neutrality.

¹²⁵ Clymer, 'The Perils of Neutrality', p. 631.

7 The China Factor

After de Gaulle recognised China in 1964, the impact of that country on the war was a regular topic in Washington and, as documents show, the American Vietnam policy was heavily influenced by the 'China factor.' The administration's attitude toward China also explains a number of issues related to neutralisation. It indicates why Vietnam was considered vital for American security, why so much value was placed on honouring the SEATO commitment, and, finally, why worldwide credibility was supposed to be at stake.

China debates were not new in Washington. They had occurred several times before, and from a military perspective they often revolved around the question of whether the United States should fight on the 'Asian mainland.' The issue had a geopolitical dimension that went back to the nineteenth century when Admiral Mahan, in the spirit of Halford Mackinder, conceived of American security in largely naval terms. He saw the United States as a large 'island' flanked by immense oceans. Control of these waters was considered 'vital,' and it was in the interest of the United States to maintain a strong navy and to occupy strategically important points. Mahan meant Hawaii and the Philippines, but as a result of World War II and the communist take-over in China, Japan and Taiwan were also added to the list.

In naval terms, therefore, American security interests ended in the 'blue waters of the Pacific' and did not extend to the Asian mainland. If the United States had interests at all on the mainland, they were of a secondary nature and would not warrant massive intervention. The contrast with Europe was obvious. After the Second World War and especially with the coming of the Cold War, Western Europe – although in naval terms also located on the Eurasian mainland – was considered vital for American security, as evidenced in the creation of NATO.

While there was general agreement on the European commitment, there was much disagreement over where to draw the line in Asia. This was evident with respect to Korea. As a result of the Second World War, the United States had troops stationed south of the 38th Parallel, but the Truman Administration was ill at ease with this commitment and ready to leave the mainland as soon as possible. When the Korean War broke out that became impossible, and when the American troops were thrown back to the 38th parallel by the

intervening Chinese, a furious debate erupted over the wisdom of fighting on the Asian mainland.

The division ran mainly along party lines. For the Republicans, but also for General MacArthur, America had clear security interests on the mainland; the Democrats denied this and stuck by the traditional concept. The issue was never clearly settled, but when the Republicans came to office they not only aimed at the isolation of China but also tried to roll back the 'bamboo curtain,' as it was called. The creation of SEATO and the commitment to South Vietnam were part of this strategy.

Although Kennedy was a Democrat, he did not return to the Roosevelt-Truman line but, as shown, carried on in the Dulles tradition. In his and Johnson's Administrations Dean Rusk was the most explicit exponent of this continuity. As a former State Department 'Asia hand' he had survived the McCarthy era unscarred and in his memoirs admits having supported the Roosevelt-Truman doctrine. As a result he originally disapproved of the Eisenhower Administration's Asia policy:

Although I was out of government and watching only from the sidelines, I thought that the SEATO Treaty was a mistake. Of course, we in the Kennedy and Johnson administration made our own decisions on Vietnam, and events of the 1960s remain our responsibility, but I think the die for American commitment to Southeast Asia was cast in 1955. When the United States signed that treaty, SEATO became the law of the land and linked South Vietnam to the general structure of collective security.¹²⁶

It is true, of course, that SEATO was a turning point, but it linked Vietnam only tenuously to the American alliance system, or 'the general structure of collective security,' as Rusk preferred. His interpretation seems exceedingly legalistic and can only be understood if 'ChiCom' is brought into the picture. SEATO was meant to contain Chinese expansion in Southeast Asia and, as Lodge showed in his neutralisation plan, it was intended to promote roll-back! A number of officials in Washington had never quite overcome the 'loss' of China in 1949.

As indicated earlier, the Department of State was right in anticipating Chinese intervention in case the United States massively invaded North Vietnam on the ground, thereby provoking

¹²⁶ Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 427.

another Korean situation. Some Chinese evidence now available points in the same direction.¹²⁷ But the American administration miscalculated the global dimensions of the Chinese threat, and in this it deviated from the perceptions of its European allies.

The difference between the American and the European standpoints shows neatly in two discussions Dean Rusk held in 1964. Both involved French diplomats and dealt with China – and neutralisation. On 12 April, Rusk met French Foreign Minister Couve de Murville at the American Embassy in Manila. The conversation centred on the French understanding of neutrality and quickly turned to the role of China. In the eyes of Couve de Murville China was 'an expansionist, imperialist country,' and Southeast Asia had always been a target of China's expansionism. 'All Southeast Asian countries are terrified at the thought of Chinese expansion,' Couve added, but he thought it was in China's own interest to reach an accommodation with the West:

...in order to concentrate on internal development and to reduce the threat to it, China would renounce its expansionist drive in Southeast Asia on the understanding that Southeast Asia would not be hostile. The Hanoi government would have to follow suit.¹²⁸

China was also the topic of a second conversation held in July between Rusk and French Ambassador Alphand. Alphand felt that it was necessary to talk to the Chinese, upon which Rusk replied that the United States had talked with them more seriously than any other Western nation: 'We have not ignored China but we haven't liked what we have heard in these talks.'¹²⁹ The difference between the French and Rusk was obvious: France was willing to live with Chinese expansion and thought it could somehow be accommodated, but Dean Rusk saw no such possibility. To him the Chinese threat was global rather than regional.

Walter Lippmann, when at the White House on 31 May, also discussed China. Present were Secretary McNamara, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, and George Ball. The President sat in on part of the discussion. According to a summary written by George Ball, Lippmann stated that the course of action he proposed 'was based on the assumption that all of

¹²⁷ Quing Zhai, 'Beijing and the Vietnam Conflict, 1964-1965: New Chinese Evidence', in Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington D.C., Winter 1995/1996, Issues 6-7, pp. 233-50.

¹²⁸ *FRUS*, Vol. I (1961-3), p. 235.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 535.

Southeast Asia was destined inevitably to become a zone of Chinese Communist control,' that the United States 'could not halt Chinese expansionism in that area,' and that the best hope 'was to seek by political means to slow that expansionism down and make it less brutal.'¹³⁰

The three conversations reveal that the proponents of neutralisation had a view of China that was rejected by most officials in Washington. While everyone agreed that China was an expansionist and even imperialist power, the administration thought that accommodation was out of the question. In the administration's view, this was no longer the Imperial China of former centuries, as Chester Bowles would have it, and neither was it the China of the Second World War, as Mansfield claimed. As the recent border incidents with India and the unleashing of the Cultural Revolution showed, Mao's China had become an intensely ideological power with universal ambitions unwilling to coexist with its capitalist enemies. In tandem with the Soviet Union it was spreading revolution around the globe, often under the mantle of neutralism. It was an illusion to argue, as Alphan and Mansfield did, that there were serious differences between Moscow and 'Peiping' over influence in Southeast Asia. There was more to unite the two Communist powers than to separate them.

Given the worldwide dimension of the challenge, American security interests reached beyond the Pacific Ocean and included the Asian mainland. As Rusk told Ambassador Alphan in an earlier conversation, he and Kennedy saw Southeast Asia and Vietnam as vital to American security.¹³¹ And as he emphasised in his memoirs, this region was every bit as vital as Cuba or Berlin.¹³²

On this last point the French disagreed completely, and so did Ball, Bowles, Mansfield, and Lippmann. In their eyes an American withdrawal from Southeast Asia would not affect European security; on the contrary, it would enhance it. Should the United States get lost in the paddies and jungles of Vietnam, as Ball liked to say, it would damage rather than help NATO and 'collective security.' They all agreed that Europe was more important than Southeast Asia. Redrawing the line through neutralisation would in effect increase American credibility in Europe.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 400.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 585.

¹³² Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 435.