

Foreign Relations, 1969–1976, Volume XX, Southeast Asia, 1969–1972

Summary

(This is not an official statement of policy by the Department of State, but is intended only as a guide to the contents of this volume.)

The Nixon administration sought the assistance of Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia in its quest to end the conflict in Southeast Asia. Thailand was a principal U.S. ally during the Vietnam war, supplying both troops and airbases. The Philippines sent a battalion to Vietnam, furnished key bases in the Pacific, and contributed contract employees to support the war effort. Indonesia's role in the war was more limited, but as a non-aligned state it provided regional support for Cambodia as well as significant and timely military aid. Although important bilateral issues shaped U.S. negotiations with each of these countries, the conflict in Vietnam remained the overarching framework determining U.S. policy in the region.

Thailand

As a front-line state bordering Laos and Cambodia, Thailand was a crucial component of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia, and the Nixon administration actively cultivated a close relationship with Thai leaders to coordinate the war in Laos. Thailand provided the third largest contingent of foreign troops to the Vietnam war (after the United States and Korea). As part of their Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) obligations, Thailand also informally arranged for the establishment of U.S. airbases, staffed by approximately 45,000 U.S. personnel, to support bombing campaigns in Southeast Asia. Because fighting between the United States and the North Vietnamese often overflowed into the neighboring Cambodian and Lao sanctuaries, Thailand sent volunteer troops to fight alongside the U.S.-backed ethnic Lao guerrillas. In the subsequent series of seesaw battles with North Vietnamese regulars in the Lao highlands, the Nixon administration increasingly came to rely on Thai artillery and troops to support the Hmong (formerly known as Meo), especially in the Plain of Jars. When the North Vietnamese engaged in their annual dry season offensives in Laos, the Thai helped to blunt those campaigns. Given Thai efforts in Laos and the crucial assistance they lent to the air war, the Nixon administration was sympathetic to Thai requests for military and economic assistance, training, and equipment, as well as special relief for the textile industry.

Despite the spirit of cooperation that existed between the U.S. and Thailand, tensions simmered under the surface. Criticism by U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee members Stuart Symington and William Fulbright over the degree of U.S. commitment to Thailand caused Thai leaders to question U.S. security assurances. Indeed, Symington's charge that Thai troops fighting in South Vietnam were, for all intents and purposes, mercenaries, caused Thai leaders to bristle openly. As Thailand realized that the United States was withdrawing its troops from South Vietnam, it asked for assurance that the drawdown did not imply a weakening of the U.S. commitment to Thailand's security. The United States had concerns about Thai policies as well. Anxious about an insurgency in northeast Thailand, U.S. officials provided military assistance and largely unheeded advice in hopes of encouraging Thai military leaders to take the conflict more seriously. In addition, U.S. hopes for democracy in Thailand suffered a setback following the 1969 Thai election when the military reestablished control. Finally, the Thai Government's failure to stem the country's steadily increasing drug production and trafficking only served to exacerbate tensions.

The important role of Thai support is presented primarily through the records of the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG), the NSC subgroup charged with overseeing and directing the secret war in Laos, headed by Assistant to the President Henry Kissinger. This volume provides significant new details about this lesser-known theater in the war in Southeast Asia.

Philippines

As an ally in the Vietnam war, the Philippines received special attention in Washington. The Nixon administration viewed the Philippine contribution of an engineering battalion to the conflict in South Vietnam as the ideal, symbolic example of collective, defensive support for the besieged nation. The Philippines, moreover, was home to two major U.S. military bases in the western Pacific, Clark Airbase and Subic Bay Naval Station. This combination enhanced the close relationship forged over a long, shared history, and was perpetuated by personal relations between the Marcos government and many U.S. officials. Early in the first term, President Nixon, Secretary of State William Rogers, and Assistant to the President Henry Kissinger met with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, his wife Imelda, and other high-ranking officials. U.S. Ambassador Henry Byroade enjoyed a particularly warm relationship with Marcos, a bond Marcos hoped would facilitate special access to the Nixon administration.

Fissures in the normally solid relationship, however, emerged during the first Nixon administration and were centered around the military base renegotiation process. In the initial discussions, President Nixon's insistence that the United States drastically cut its military personnel in the Philippines as a means of improving the U.S. balance of payments frustrated Philippine officials. Crimes committed against Filipinos by U.S. servicemen were a particularly problematic issue and added further complications to the base negotiations. Tensions also emerged over the new Philippine constitutional prohibition that prevented non-Filipinos from owning land, which created considerable problems for land-holding U.S. citizens and companies in the Philippines. Finally, Marcos's support of the extension of the Laurel-Langley agreements, giving preferential treatment to Philippine products in the United States, did little to smooth the growing discord as the agreements ran against the general U.S. move towards free trade.

The Nixon administration recognized the Philippines as a special friend, but the culture of corruption, the imposition of martial law in 1972, and the dictatorial tendencies of the Marcos government worried some U.S. officials. The Embassy highlighted these problems and U.S. officials tried to encourage Marcos to reform his government's practices and move back toward democracy. As U.S. critics vocalized their concerns about the Marcos government, particularly in the Senate's Symington subcommittee, the Nixon administration rallied behind Marcos and worked hard to blunt criticism of the Philippines in Congress. Instead of dealing directly with reports from U.S. Government experts that there were real problems in the Philippines, administration officials tended to ignore or downplay the significance of those statements. Although the Nixon administration neither encouraged nor approved of the imposition of martial law, it chose to continue working with Marcos as his support for the Vietnam war and the Philippine role in the Pacific overshadowed doubts about the country's internal policies. Yet, while the Nixon administration appeared to support Marcos, the U.S. Embassy in Manila maintained a low-level dialogue with Senators Benigno Aquino and Sergio Osmena and other prominent Marcos opponents. It was this failure to fully embrace the Marcos government that, on occasion, inspired concern in the Marcos family that the United States was secretly working with Marcos opponents. Although U.S. officials assured Marcos that they were not actively supporting other candidates, or Marcos's opponents, a lingering doubt remained within the Marcos family.

Indonesia

President Nixon saw Indonesia as a key country in Southeast Asia, not just because of its size (it had the largest population), but because it could serve as a counterweight to Chinese influence in the area. In 1968, before he assumed the presidency, Nixon met General Suharto on a private visit to Indonesia. While there, Nixon stayed as a guest of Ambassador Marshall Green, who became the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in March 1969. In July 1969, President Nixon traveled to

Asia, including Indonesia, to articulate his new foreign policy strategy, the Nixon Doctrine, emphasizing that the United States would not involve itself in Asian countries' internal security problems. Nixon was quick to point out to Indonesian officials, however, that the United States was not abandoning its allies or its treaty obligations. Indeed, the United States expanded its small military assistance program to Indonesia and the President directed Kissinger to set up a special channel of communication with Indonesian generals to discuss bilateral military affairs. As a result, U.S. economic assistance to Indonesia grew substantially. Moreover, the U.S. worked to address one of Indonesia's most pressing problems, the enormous international debt accrued during the free spending Sukarno years and the difficulties of repayment. The Nixon administration spearheaded the international effort to reschedule and reduce this debt through an organization composed of Indonesia's debt holding nations and international lending organizations. The result was a plan to reschedule Indonesia's debt over 30 years at zero interest.

At U.S. request, Indonesia provided AK-47 small arms and ammunition to the beleaguered Cambodian army in an effort to address the military supply crisis of the Lon Nol government in its fight against North Vietnamese regulars in Cambodia. Also at U.S. urging, Indonesia took a leading diplomatic role supporting the Lon Nol government among non-communist nations of Southeast Asia.

This volume is a companion to the volumes on the Vietnam war during the Nixon administration, 1969–1972, the first of which, *Foreign Relations, 1969–1976, volume VI, Vietnam, January 1969–July 1970*, has been published. Three more volumes are forthcoming that will cover the end of the Vietnam conflict up to the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973. This volume on Southeast Asia is the last installment in a long series of print volumes that cover the non-Indochina states of Southeast Asia during the Vietnam war. For the period from 1973 to 1976, the coverage of Southeast Asia will be in an electronic-only volume.