

Foreign Policy:

AUSTRALIA IN VIETNAM



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12 Modern History
Research Assignment



12 MODERN HISTORY

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FOREIGN POLICY: AUSTRALIA IN VIETNAM

HISTORICAL STATEMENT:

"The Menzies government, rocked by militarism in South-East Asia and fearing nuclear war, had looked to America in 1962 to prop up Australia's run down military. The price the United States exacted for this policy was an Australian Commitment to the defence of Vietnam."

(Courier Mail, 1 Jan, 1993.)

Australia has long feared the nations to the north. A belief shared with most of the Western world, Australia dreaded that communist forces were dedicated to world domination when the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong won control over mainland China in 1949. In the same year, the attack of South Korea by communist North Korea heightened communism paranoia in Australia. Yet, fear and suspicion of world communism reached a fever pitch in the 1950's with the outbreak of war in Vietnam. This sparked the era in which the Australian government sought to establish a barrier against communist expansion; effectively implementing a policy of forward defence and a reliance on the United States for military aid. The price of American protection, however, was an Australian commitment to the Vietnam War.

The Australian people were surprised and frightened by the Japanese attacks on Darwin during World War II, and the sudden imminence of foreign invasion. Almost immediately, the Australian people realised just how close to our shores the neighbouring nations of Asia were. Following the war, a belief spread amongst the general population that any potential military threat to the security of Australia was likely to come from an Asian nation, particularly an expanding Asian communist "regime". American President Eisenhower referred to the "falling domino principle", by which he implied that every time a nation fell to communist rule, its neighbour would be the next to fall, just as one domino pushes over another. Thus Australia developed a strong determination to stop the "fall of the dominoes", taking to a policy of contribution to military operations in far-off South-East Asian nations - in effect, "keeping the menace away from Australia's shores"¹. Thus, "the structure of the Australian Defence Force was to be deliberately shaped and organised primarily to

¹ Cowie, H.R., *Australia and Asia: A Changing Relationship* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 222.

play a part ... overseas, rather than for the independent defence of Australia"². This would come to be known as our "Forward Defence" policy.

Australia was not alone. The United States shared in the Western fear of Communist expansion in South East Asia, and had adopted a policy of forward defence similar to our own. However, the American secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, sought in September, 1954, to erect another barrier to contain communism in Asia, naming it the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation.

The members of the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) were Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Britain, France, Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines. Each member committed itself to "maintain and develop its individual capacity to resist armed attack", agreed that such an attack would be regarded as endangering "its own peace and safety", and undertook to "meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional practices". At the insistence of the USA, the clauses regarding "meeting the common danger" applied only to communist aggression, hence,

"The formation of SEATO was a product of the basic belief in the "domino theory" ... Capitalist powers regarded the total "containment" of communism as a necessary safeguard against its spread. SEATO thus was an essential link in the chain of alliances ... erected to "contain" communism ..." ³.

Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were guaranteed their "integrity" by a protocol to the Manila Pact, later to be used as justification for the involvement of the United States and Australia in the Vietnam War.

In its search for security, the Australian government had acquired in SEATO the assurances it wanted. However, by its obligation to help its allies, and not to expect them to meet the "common danger" unaided, the Australian government had also undertaken responsibilities which drew it into the Vietnam War. Because the Vietnamese National Liberation Front and the Viet Minh favoured a communist reorganisation of society, it was interpreted by the United States and Australia as part of an effort by Communist China to dominate the region. As Vietnam was a protocol state of SEATO, the United States and Australian governments were "required" to take action. Prime Minister Menzies stated that,

"South Viet Nam happens to be one of the protocol states under the SEATO Treaty and that means that the obligations under the SEATO

² Beazley, K, *Australia's Defence Policy*, National Press Club, Canberra., 12 June, 1985.

³ Cowie, H.R., *Australia and Asia: A Changing Relationship* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 246.

Treaty, which include military obligations, extend to that country ...
All this is an expression in action of SEATO obligations"⁴.

However, the Menzies Papers of 1964 have subsequently revealed that the Australian government was so anxious to provide the United States of America with moral support that it had asked the South Vietnamese government to make a request for SEATO assistance. In fact, the Australian government wanted to "demonstrate Australia's willingness to support the United States in South Vietnam with as much assistance as lies within our capabilities"⁵. Hence, Australia would "supply two destroyers, its infantry battalion and other elements already serving with the Commonwealth Brigade in Malaysia ... [and recommend] that six Caribou transport aircraft be sent there"⁶ in an attempt to justify "Australia's and New Zealand's importance as reliable countries whose security, prosperity and growth it is in the interest of the US to assist"⁷. The Australian government "did not want the US to be able to complain that Australia was not pulling its weight"⁸ and while "Australia did not have the capacity to supply the [military] items sought"⁹, our moral support was appreciated.

Justification for Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War was given to the Menzies Cabinet by an additional factor - the threat of nuclear war. Understanding that the USA was prepared to use nuclear weapons in Vietnam if necessary, the Menzies government injected Australian troops into Vietnam in the hope that America would have no use for such warfare. This decision proved effective, as the United States did not resort to nuclear warfare in Vietnam.

Australia's commitment to Vietnam gave the United States' war effort a temporary appearance of legitimacy, however by 1969 it had become clear that the war did not

⁴ Menzies, Sir R., *Current Notes on International Affairs* (Canberra: Department of External Affairs, July, 1965.), 415.

⁵ Blanch, K., "1964 Year of Decision," *The Sunday Mail*, 1 January, 1995, sec. Review, 43.

⁶ Blanch, K., "1964 Year of Decision," *The Sunday Mail*, 1 January, 1995, sec. Review, 44.

⁷ Pemberton, G., "Menzies Backed Nuclear Strike on Vietnam," *The Australian*, 1 January, 1993, 5.

⁸ Sheridan, G., "Menzies Feared Slide Into Nuclear War," *The Australian*, 1 January, 1993, 1.

⁹ Blanch, K., "1964 Year of Decision," *The Sunday Mail*, 1 January, 1995, sec. Review, 43.

serve any noble cause and could not be won. After twenty years, Australia began to realise that fear of communist expansion was unwarranted, but had additionally maintained its SEATO responsibilities. Who would have believed that before the war was officially over the US President would be visiting the leader of Communist China or that Vietnam would go to war with China?

The Cold War mentality of that era had sparked and fuelled our fear of communist expansion and aggression. Australia had been eager to commit troops to Vietnam in order to establish a barrier against the growing "regime" in South-East Asia, but more importantly worked to gain the promise of support and protection of the United States, in case our future security is ever threatened. We effectively experimented with a policy of "forward defence", fulfilled our obligations of SEATO to support America in meeting the "common danger", and prevented a nuclear war. Today, we are seeking to befriend those nations to the north and to remove the barrier we strived so hard to implement in that era from the memories of our Asian neighbours.

