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# SEATO Stumbles: The Failure of the NATO Model in the Third World

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# SEATO Stumbles: The Failure of the NATO Model in the Third World

## Abstract

NATO as an alliance has stood the test of time since the early post-war years. Yet similar alliances such as SEATO passed into history long ago. The problem with the NATO model of alliance was its inability to be applied to the Third World. The particular circumstances of Southeast Asia prevented SEATO from becoming a true successor to the NATO alliance system. In addition, the approach of Eisenhower and his administration to Southeast Asia and anti-communist alliances was undermined by their own political needs and personal experiences. Southeast Asia was fit into the mold of the post-war period and the Cold War.

## Keywords

Eisenhower, SEATO, Dulles, 1950's, NATO, Third World, International Relations

## Disciplines

Asian History | Diplomatic History | European History | History | International and Area Studies | International Relations | Political History | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social History | South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies

## Comments

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# SEATO Stumbles

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The Failure of the NATO Model in the Third  
World

Louis Gentilucci

5/1/2015

Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected President in 1952, and left behind his newly formed NATO High Command for the White House. The NATO alliance would continue to expand under Eisenhower's political protection, becoming one of his greatest legacies. The successes of NATO led to its application outside the European theater of the Cold War. In 1954, agreements were forged to create the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, an Asian version of NATO. This alliance would form the bedrock defense of free Asian countries. Yet the SEATO alliance suffered an early death, being disbanded in 1977 as members abandoned the organization and U.S. Vietnam policy imploded. The SEATO alliance was doomed to failure, being a First World solution for a Third World problem. NATO was designed to tie together the interests of the old capitalist democracies of Western Europe. It was designed to fight and win the next great war. SEATO was intended to ally the different former colonies of Southeast Asia into one cohesive bloc. Its major objective was to root out Communist insurgencies. It was this failure to distinguish the needs of Southeast Asia from the needs of Europe that would destroy SEATO and drag the United States almost alone into the morass of Vietnam.

On June 1, 1952, General Dwight D. Eisenhower formally submitted his resignation as Supreme NATO Commander to President Harry Truman. In his letter, he defended his decision to leave NATO, stating "the special organizational and initial planning missions that were deemed critical in the late weeks of 1950 have now been accomplished."<sup>1</sup> Eisenhower had reframed the Western alliance of World War Two into a defensive alliance opposed to Soviet expansion. He had navigated the treacherous political waters of Europe and created a force for

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<sup>1</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, Alfred DuPont Chandler et al., eds., (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2003) <http://eisenhower.press.jhu.edu>.

freedom in the West. The political skills honed in the crucible of total war served him well and during his presidency the alliance blossomed into the crown jewel of the Cold War.<sup>2</sup>

NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, was born not long after the fall of the Third Reich, but its roots go much deeper. NATO was the culmination of substantial military theory in the wake of World War One. This particular school of thought, expounded by the likes of Fox Conner and George Marshall, emphasized the vulnerability of democratic countries against a totalitarian foe.<sup>3</sup> The belligerent and expansionist Nazi Germany demonstrated the perils of democracies acting independently. Countries like Denmark, Poland, and Czechoslovakia were conquered by the Nazis through outright war and political maneuvering. In order to counter the unity of dictatorships, democracies needed to band together and shoulder the burden of war amongst themselves. Only a grand alliance of democracies could protect free people around the world.<sup>4</sup>

Eisenhower had been a student of this school since the 1910's. He and George Patton had pioneered new tank warfare strategies while at Fort Meade and in Gettysburg. Their strategies called for a massing of armored might to punch through enemy lines and reach deep into the rear of enemy formations. Though his ideas were not popular at the time, Eisenhower continued to expand upon these ideas and theories through study and practice. During his time serving in the Panama Canal Zone, Eisenhower received what he called "a graduate course in military theory" at the hands of Fox Conner.<sup>5</sup> Versed in Clausewitz and the practices of modern tank warfare, Eisenhower became a leading student of this modern military theory. After his time in Panama,

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Perry, *Partners in Command: George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower in War and Peace*, Reprint ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 310.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-46.

<sup>4</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell My Friends* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967), 226.

<sup>5</sup> Perry, *Partners in Command*, 45.

Eisenhower was assigned as an aide to General Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines while the general served as a military advisor to the American protectorate's government. There, Eisenhower learned how to assuage the egos of great men, MacArthur's in this case.<sup>6</sup> It was a trial by fire. Whether it was the dispute over receiving Filipino military accolades or the allocating of blame for an unpopular military parade, Ike learned to handle himself.<sup>7</sup> Despite their sometimes explosive disputes, Eisenhower and MacArthur respected each other as officers and Eisenhower grew as an administrator. Eisenhower's long and arduous education would make him an ideal officer in the international conflict to come.

After his promotion to the staff of General George Marshall, Eisenhower was given the opportunity to demonstrate what he had learned. Eisenhower was tasked with organizing the Allied war effort in the European theater, where America's allies were deeply divided over matters of strategy and leadership. Eisenhower's work balancing the needs of many dissonant voices would prove critical to future European alliances. He handled the politics of his troops, moving anti-British American officers to the rear, and reigning in the excesses of anti-American sentiment amongst the British officer corps.<sup>8</sup> He fought to keep the rivalries of men like General Patton and Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery in check. He parried the political needs of the democratic leaders of the Allies to advance the essential war effort. Allied efforts to improve coordination between the different national military branches yielded mostly excellent results on the battlefield. Daring commanders were promoted as they practiced the ideas of combat Eisenhower espoused, while hesitant and overly cautious officers were cashiered, such as Lloyd

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<sup>6</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 223-226.

<sup>7</sup> John Eisenhower, *General Ike: a Personal Reminiscence* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 28-30.

<sup>8</sup> Perry, *Partners in Command*, 167-184.

Fredendall.<sup>9</sup> Eisenhower turned the alliance into a well-oiled war machine. It would be this massive machine that would lead to victory on the beaches of Normandy and meet up with the Soviet army in the ashes of Germany.<sup>10</sup>

As the wartime alliance with the Soviets began to fray in the aftermath of World War II, talks began about a new post-war alliance. Stalin was not cooperating with the Western allies, gradually installing Communist regimes in all Soviet-liberated territory. Soviet policy became more intractable in relation to the West. The fear of a new totalitarian, expansionist ideology taking root in Europe led Western leaders to prepare for conflict using the lessons of World War II. A grand alliance of free democratic nations was needed for the defense of all free peoples. So began the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.<sup>11</sup>

NATO was a massive undertaking, in spite of the groundwork laid by World War II. Many of the parties involved wished to end their alliance at the war's end. NATO was threatened by war-weary Britons, recalcitrant Frenchmen, occupied Germans, and isolationist Americans. Great Britain, having borne the costs of the war for the longest period, was in a poor position to contribute to a grand alliance's army. Its economy was in shambles, its manpower reserves were depleted, and its empire was coming down around its ears.<sup>12</sup> France was suffering not only the effects of German occupation but a more violent collapse of its imperial power.<sup>13</sup> Germany was demilitarized and divided, having endured de-Nazification and its division into East and West Germany.<sup>14</sup> And the era of Democratic rule was under assault in the United States, and with it

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<sup>9</sup> Perry, *Partners in Command*, 171-173.

<sup>10</sup> Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: a Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2003), 695.

<sup>11</sup> Perry, *Partners in Command*, 379.

<sup>12</sup> Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*. <http://eisenhower.press.jhu.edu>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

the robust foreign policy of Roosevelt and Truman. The Republicans, riding public sentiment, were threatening to return to the isolationist policies of the interwar period.<sup>15</sup>

There were other areas of dispute. Certain members, such as Britain and France had a history of competing imperial claims. Other nations harbored ill-feelings toward their fellow alliance members. France was especially leery of allowing West Germany to rearm as a NATO member.<sup>16</sup> However, the disputes could stretch back further than the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Directly before leaving for the Republican National Convention, Eisenhower had to settle a dispute about Danish troops defending historically contested German territory between Denmark and Germany.<sup>17</sup> War reparations and reconstruction also muddied the waters of the alliance. Money was needed to rebuild Europe and restart its ravaged economy. Several prominent members of the alliance had an uphill battle winning the votes for the treaty ratification, overcoming major peace lobbies that believed the alliance would start the next war.

NATO had no small share of challenges in its formative days. Nevertheless, Eisenhower managed to pull the alliance together. He assuaged the fears of the French about German rearmament. He lobbied the American Congress for the money to rebuild and rearm Europe. Eisenhower, employing his prestige as the great liberator of Europe, pulled together the disparate political factions of Europe to ratify the treaty. The longstanding cooperation amongst the majority of the European members helped ease them in the alliance more easily. In 1949, the treaty was ratified, and the school of Atlanticism was born.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries Into the History of the Cold War*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 157.

NATO embodied the war-time alliance in many ways. It established a united military command, which was critical to making the alliance effective. The war-time experiences made such a loss of sovereignty more tolerable to the European governments. They had come to appreciate the benefits of a united command. Eisenhower's continuing service in that role also eased the discomfort some Europeans had. This gave NATO the flexibility and resources needed to counter Soviet forces beyond the Iron Curtain. NATO was clear in its purpose: all members were obligated to protect all other members from any aggression.<sup>19</sup> This well-defined stance gave NATO a firm foundation around which to build its policies. Any aggression called all members to defend the alliance, with a well-organized core of troops under the NATO High Command.

The United States expected member nations to play their part in funding the alliance. The idea was that the United States would protect and shelter Western Europe with its standing army and nuclear umbrella until Europe could handle its own defense once more.<sup>20</sup> The economic recovery of post-war Europe was critical to the alliance. The Marshall Plan helped Europe mend the damage of the war and jump-start the economic engine of the west. Germany was allowed to retain its heavy industrial capacities. British and French industries rebounded in the wake of World War II, creating new markets for American goods and providing the industrial base for their modern militaries.<sup>21</sup> Prosperity strengthened the alliance politically, as the benefits of free markets prevented Communist parties from feeding on the social discontent and weakening the

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<sup>19</sup> NATO Treaty; April 4, 1949, *American Foreign Policy, 1950-1955*, Basic Docs, vol 1, Department of State Publication 6446 General Foreign Policy Series 117 Washington, DC : Government Printing Office, 1957 in "The Avalon Project," Yale Law School, accessed May 1, 2015, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/nato.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/nato.asp).

<sup>20</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*. <http://eisenhower.press.jhu.edu>.

<sup>21</sup> C. Maxwell Stanley, *Waging Peace* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1959), 112-120.

resolve of alliance members. With Europe's economy on the rebound, the prospects of the new NATO alliance looked promising, and Europe's future looked bright.

In 1954, Eisenhower had another opportunity to create an alliance as a bulwark against Communism, this time in Asia. The Asian continent was rife with Communist insurgency. Asians had suffered similar devastation during World War Two, and had suffered a similar explosion of Communist regimes in the wake of the war. So in Manila, 1954, America and her Asian allies founded SEATO, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization. The NATO model was being applied to the hot spot of Asia.

It was this conflation of the needs of Southeast Asia with the needs of Europe that would give birth to SEATO, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization. And it would be this same conflation of needs that would be the death of SEATO twenty-two years later. The alliance required an industrialized economic base, a people invested in their existing economic system, and a Cold War "us versus them" mentality. Southeast Asia lacked in all of these aspects, but America's efforts continued along these lines nevertheless. This well-meaning mistake would cost the United States dearly over the next generation.

Compared with the founding of NATO, the founding of SEATO appeared to be much more precipitous. NATO had already been established as the bulwark against Communist expansion in Europe since 1951, proving the effectiveness of such an alliance. The isolationist wing of the Republican Party had been reined in by Eisenhower's election and by the death of its greatest national proponent, Robert Taft.<sup>22</sup> A new, more aggressive and robust foreign policy was in place thanks to President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles.

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<sup>22</sup> Ambrose Videos. Eisenhower's Secret War, Part 1, *The Lure of the Presidency*, 2013.

Eisenhower himself was a shrewd Cold Warrior, carrying the prestige of his past service with him to his foreign policy. The American public believed in Eisenhower, allowing him an essentially free hand in foreign policy. Moreover, several of America's strongest allies, Britain and France, were heavily invested in Southeast Asia remaining free of Communism. With so many forces arrayed in favor of an alliance, it seemed that the NATO model would be successfully transplanted to Southeast Asia. NATO style alliances would become the default tool of American military foreign policy.

But the conditions on the ground in Asia were vastly different than those of Europe in the early days of NATO. SEATO was born at a time of great conflict, with Asia becoming the new hotspot of the Cold War. During World War II, Japan had run roughshod over the majority of the Far East. Their occupation and exploitation of vast swaths of Asia fueled resistance movements, many employing guerilla tactics and Communist rhetoric. These groups would continue to plague most of Southeast Asia throughout the 1950's and 1960's.

Some of these groups' initial successes were staggering to the American cause. In 1949, the Chinese Nationalists of Chiang Kai-Shek were defeated in their long running civil war with the Chinese Communists of Mao Zedong. China, with its massive population, had fallen into the Communist orbit, doubling the size of the Communist bloc. The Eisenhower administration had inherited the Korean War from President Truman. North Korea, sanctioned by the USSR and supported by Chinese "volunteer" troops, had attempted to annex the entire Korean peninsula.<sup>23</sup> Thousands of Americans had died trying to drive back North Korean troops and their Chinese allies. Chinese troops intermittently bombarded upon the outpost islands of Quemoy and Matsu

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<sup>23</sup> Evan Thomas, *Ike's Bluff: President Eisenhower's Secret Battle to Save the World*, Reprint ed. (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013), 34, 67.

protecting Taiwan, in an attempt to bully the Taiwanese and test the United States' commitment to the Nationalist cause.<sup>24</sup> The French were being broken down by the ongoing Communist insurgency in their Indochina colony, an insurgency that would later plague the new American client state of South Vietnam. Communist insurgencies were also appearing in all across Southeast Asia, threatening to continue the indomitable march of Communism in the Far East. It seemed the nations of Asia were primed to fall to Communism, as per the Domino Theory.<sup>25</sup> Nations had already begun to fall, and a chain reaction seemed inevitable. Surely if NATO could protect Western Europe from Communist aggression, a similar institution could be used to shore up the defenses of the free lands of Asia.

The State Department had been studiously working to establish alliances with the nations of Southeast Asia, but the fall of Diem Bien Phu in 1954 forced their hand. War and strife had been raging across French Indochina since the invasion of the Japanese in 1942. The Japanese invasion, and subsequent withdrawal, left a power vacuum in the French colony. Native resistance, which had been forged under Japanese occupation, surged up and sought independence for Vietnam. France was hard-pressed to maintain its empire in the wake of Nazi occupation. The Nazi invaders had sapped France economically and had undermined the legitimacy of colonial hegemony with its racial expansionism. The empire was threatened on several fronts, with Algeria roiling with independence sentiments and French Sub-Sahara Africa yearning to join the other newly independent nations. France would have been justified in

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<sup>24</sup> Rosemary Foot, "The Eisenhower administration's fear of empowering the Chinese." *Political Science Quarterly (Academy Of Political Science)* 111, no. 3 (Fall96 1996): 505.

<sup>25</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956: the White House Years* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 333.

leaving Indochina in charge of its own future and instead tend to affairs closer to home, like Algeria.<sup>26</sup>

Yet France remained committed to restoring its hegemony to Indochina, as it did throughout its colonial empire. That commitment led to a bloody guerilla war, with heavy colonialist overtones. The native elites who had allied with the French against the Communists were branded as imperialist stooges, undermining the local alternatives to Communist rule. France's behavior did not help the United States' case that it was not a "neo-colonialist" and that SEATO was truly about protecting against "Communist imperialism." The war would slowly drag France down, until its climatic defeat at Diem Bien Phu.<sup>27</sup>

In the months before the fall of Diem Bien Phu, when defeat seemed to hang in the air, Secretary of State Dulles began working on an American response to the Indochina debacle. Many different ideas were considered, including direct American intervention, but Eisenhower would not directly intervene without massive allied support. Eisenhower's New Look policy required avoiding bush wars since he wanted to reduce military expenditures by reducing the regular army. Only the regular American army would be able to save the French army from disaster.<sup>28</sup>

With the military solution essentially off the table, Dulles starting organizing the framework of what would become the SEATO alliance.<sup>29</sup> The fall of Diem Bien Phu and the start of the Geneva Conference increased the pressure on Dulles for a coherent American

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<sup>26</sup> Tyler Stovall, *France Since the Second World War: Seminar Studies in History* (Harlow, England: New York: Longman, 2001), 49-55.

<sup>27</sup> David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: the Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 26-29.

<sup>28</sup> Stanley, *Waging Peace*, 90-95.

<sup>29</sup> John Foster Dulles Oral History Collection. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1984. Microfilm, Lord Casey Transcript.

response to the crisis. In addition, the Geneva Accords limited the influence of SEATO by forbidding the Associated States, the states formed from French Indochina, to join in any military alliances.<sup>30</sup> France was humiliated by the terms of the Geneva Accords, being compelled to grant Indochina independence under Communist terms.<sup>31</sup> The painful diplomatic loss of the Geneva Accords needed to be counteracted, in order to reassert the authority France had lost in the region.

The French defeat needed to be addressed quickly before the dreaded Domino Theory could come to pass.<sup>32</sup> If untreated, the administration feared that neighboring countries could be made more vulnerable to infiltration, and Southeast Asia could fall into the Communist camp completely. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was employed to round up the international support for the alliance.<sup>33</sup> Dulles preached the virtues of the defensive pact system, warning potential allies of the dangers of continuing Communist subversion.<sup>34</sup> Dulles was somewhat of a zealot when it came to defensive pacts, unlike Eisenhower who was very reserved in his pronouncements on such matters.<sup>35</sup> SEATO was Dulles' project, with Eisenhower reserving his judgments to the situation in Indochina. A conference was held in Manila, hosted by America's close partner the Philippines. After a few weeks of bitter wrangling and drafting, Dulles had his response to the disappointing Geneva Accords. Two months after Eisenhower declared that the

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<sup>30</sup> Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 72.

<sup>31</sup> That is to say, terms more friendly to the Communist cause than what France was comfortable with. South Vietnam remained ostensibly non-communist and free.

<sup>32</sup> Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956*, 333.

<sup>33</sup> John Foster Dulles Oral History Collection. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1984. Microfilm, Doctor Khomen.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Townsend Hoopes, *The Devil and John Foster Dulles* (Toronto: Little, Brown, 1973), 242.

United States was not bound by the Geneva Accords, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization was born under the Manila Pact.<sup>36</sup>

The alliance bound together the nations of Australia, New Zealand, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Pakistan, Thailand, and the Philippines against aggression by the Soviet-Chinese Communists. SEATO consisted of several “non-native” members, namely the United Kingdom, France, and the United States. Britain and France were the biggest and strongest of the former colonial overlords of Southeast Asia. Burma, Ceylon, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia, India, and Pakistan had all been colonies of Britain and France before World War Two. None of these nations signed on to SEATO, in spite of their concerns over Chinese Communism and Communist insurgency. Distinctly missing from the alliance were many of these “native” countries, countries whose people and culture were native to Asia. In fact, only Pakistan, Thailand, and the Philippines were “native” members of the alliance.<sup>37</sup>

This roster included some of the anomalies of Asia. The Philippines were a former American colony with close ties to its former imperial master. Colonialism had not spoiled the relationship between the two nations as it had across most of the Third World.<sup>38</sup> The liberation of the Philippines in World War Two helped bring the two nations closer together. This relationship proved crucial in giving the United States a pliable Third World ally in Asia.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956*, 374.

<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that while Australia and New Zealand were subjects of the British Empire and are technically native to Southeast Asia, they do not share the same characteristics and experiences as their neighbors. They are, for the sake of this paper, considered transplant European nations, more akin to the United States than to Indonesia.

<sup>38</sup> Though I am not trying to downplay the exploitative and colonialist policies of the United States toward the Philippines, the two nations had a much healthier and more congenial relationship than most former colonies, which helps explain why the Philippines was willing to sign on to this American policy and support many of its Southeast Asian initiatives. This relationship existed on a government to government level at the very least.

<sup>39</sup> Yung-Hwan Jo, *US Foreign Policy in Asia: An Appraisal of America's Role in Asia* (Oxford: ABC-Clio, Inc. 1978), 390-391.

Thailand was one of the few Southeast Asian nations to maintain its independence during the late Age of Imperialism. Its struggles revolved less around de-colonization and more around how to re-stabilize in the wake of Japan's defeat in World War Two. Thailand's government had been a willing supporter of Japan in the war. The nation had been torn apart by this policy, with competing nationalist movements fighting for control of Thailand against the Japanese allied government. This collaboration damaged Thailand's credibility abroad, with its Asian neighbors looking negatively upon their association with the Japanese. It was plagued by the rise of Communist insurgents in Southeast Asia, the result of the Japanese occupation.<sup>40</sup> Thailand needed aid, and only the United States was willing and able to step in.

Pakistan was a nation created explicitly by decolonization. It had been violently cleaved from British India and had a poor sense of national identity.<sup>41</sup> Pakistan was highly leery of India, its larger "brother." Its borders were intricately entwined with India, making it vulnerable to Indian land claims. Pakistan was desperate enough for United States support that it signed on to the alliance. These three SEATO allies were hardly the best Asia had to offer.

The nations that the United States sought to include in the SEATO alliance were nations with very little experience cooperating with each other. Many of them had been fellow colonies, and had been played against one another to maintain colonial lordship. Foreign police forces were not uncommon in places like Burma.<sup>42</sup> The only unifying real unifying factor in the history of these countries was their resistance to Japanese occupation in World War Two. Prior to that, few of these nations had ever sought to work together. This lack of cooperation made forging an

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<sup>40</sup> Les Buszynski "Thailand and the Manila Pact," *The World Today* Vol. 36, No. 2 (Feb., 1980), 45-51. Accessed April 8, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40395167>

<sup>41</sup> Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: A New History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 58-61.

<sup>42</sup> Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 145.

alliance all the more difficult, especially for nations that had just regained control of their foreign policy.

The membership in SEATO weakened its own power. Without the commitments of larger nations like India and Indonesia, the alliance was too weak to defend itself. Part of the value of the NATO alliance in Europe was that the defense needs of the alliance would be distributed amongst the member nations, reducing the burden any one nation would have to bear. Though the United States was the main power behind the alliance, the European allies supplemented all American efforts. With SEATO, however, there was very little the native allies could provide. This was one critical difference between NATO and SEATO. NATO and SEATO would both depend heavily upon the United States for the bulk of their military resources. But NATO had the benefit of including rich industrial capitalist countries that could maintain their own standalone, state-of-the-art military forces. Even though the United States bore the majority of the defense burden in NATO, the inclusion of such rich and ostensibly powerful countries provided a psychological boost to the alliance. The traditional great powers of Britain, France, and Germany added their prestige to the alliance and reinforced the idea of its power, even if their contributions were on the decline.

SEATO had only two members, Australia and New Zealand, which could arguably be rich and industrialized enough to maintain such a force. The remaining members were either committed elsewhere in the world or not nearly industrialized enough to maintain the modern military needed to repel overt Communist aggression. And their numbers were too small. There were three native allies, with only two of them sharing a landmass with the major Communist forces. They could not compensate for their poor industrialization with manpower numbers, as China had done during the Korean War.

The European allies were of little use in Asia. The United Kingdom and France had to provide military support for both the NATO and SEATO alliance, alongside other commitments amongst their former colonial possessions. Given the weakness both countries were struggling with, this proved impossible. France was exempted several times from its NATO requirements in order for the nation's troops and material to be redirected to the insurgency in Vietnam.<sup>43</sup> The United Kingdom was painfully hesitant to commit its limited troops to defending Southeast Asia when Europe's own borders seemed so threatened. Britain under the diplomatic guidance of Foreign Minister Antony Eden would become a thorn in the Americans' side when it came to conflicts in Southeast Asia.<sup>44</sup> President Eisenhower would not act militarily in Southeast Asian hotspots like Diem Bien Phu in Vietnam without British support.<sup>45</sup> And British support would not be forthcoming in the wake of Britain own de-colonization debacles.

Finally, the ANZUS treaty, which militarily tied together the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, fulfilled many of the same goals that SEATO was designed for. Ratified in 1951, the ANZUS treaty was a tripartite defense pact uniting these three Anglo-Saxon transplant countries in their common defense.<sup>46</sup> Australia and New Zealand would be protected by their contract with the United States. This reduced the commitment to SEATO to redundancy. Australia and New Zealand were simply along for the ride with the Americans. They were already part of the American-led bloc, and now they had been used to supplement the pitiful roll-call of SEATO.

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<sup>43</sup> Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 23-25.

<sup>44</sup> Panagiotis Dimitrakis, *Failed Alliances of the Cold War: Britain's Strategy and Ambitions in Asia and the Middle East*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2012), 122-131.

<sup>45</sup> Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 20-23.

<sup>46</sup> John Foster Dulles Oral History Collection. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1984. Microfilm, Lord Casey.

The treaty itself contained weaknesses that would surface throughout the alliance's lifetime. The alliance charter lacked an article explicitly outlines the consequences of aggression against a member. There was no Article 5, calling for unilateral action against outside aggression.<sup>47</sup> The SEATO treaty called for each nation to view attacks upon its fellow members as "endanger[ing] its own peace and safety, and agrees that it will in that event act to meet the common danger."<sup>48</sup> How each nation shall meet the common danger is not explicitly stated, though in it assumed war would be the expected response.<sup>49</sup> In addition, there was no centralized command center of the alliance, as there had been in Europe's NATO alliance.<sup>50</sup> With no central command structure and a weak collective defense clause, SEATO was a poor imitation of the robust NATO alliance.

On top of all these serious challenges, the decolonization of the Third World was underway. British India had violently divided into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India. The Mandates of the Middle East had been revealed as shams during the interwar period. Israel had declared independence after a long running guerilla conflict and descended into conflict with its Arab and Palestinian neighbors. Once-dependable sources of raw materials like oil and rubber were becoming less compliant to the needs of Europe and the West. Nationalist leaders were

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<sup>47</sup> Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (Manila Pact); September 8, 1954, *American Foreign Policy 1950-1955* Basic Documents, vols I and II, Department of State Publication 6446 General Foreign Policy Series 117 Washington, DC : U.S. Governemnt Printing Office, 1957 in "The Avalon Project," Yale Law School, accessed May 1, 2015, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/usmu003.asp#art4para1](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/usmu003.asp#art4para1). "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all, and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually, and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 71-73.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 71-73.

rising throughout the Middle East, shaking the political field immeasurably as they tested their newfound power.<sup>51</sup>

The nations of Southeast Asia harbored their own suspicions about the United States. This was due to several factors. The United States was on generally good terms with most of the former imperial powers. United States had its own history of racism and, to a lesser degree, imperialism. The United States was a proponent of capitalism, a concept that was negatively associated with a number of exploitative colonial policies. Finally, The United States had its own vested interests in Southeast Asia that had little to do with the decolonization of the region. Sometimes, American policy conflicted with local political needs, to the detriment of American foreign policy. Many of the potential members of SEATO had at least one of these factors contributing to their refusal to join.

Burma, like Thailand, was threatened by Communist rebels supported by the Chinese. But it was also fractured in the wake of Japanese occupation and the return of British power. There were many militant groups ravaging post-colonial Burma, with the Communists being only one of many threats. This dangerously destabilized situation made Burma vulnerable to subversion at the hands of the Chinese through the rebellious Communists. However, this fear of the Chinese actually drove the Burmese to reject SEATO as a defensive option rather than to embrace American protection. The Americans, under a policy instituted by Truman and continued by Eisenhower, were supplying and supporting Chinese Nationalist troops who had fled to Burma at the end of the Chinese Civil War.<sup>52</sup> These Nationalists were waging low level attacks of sabotage against the Chinese and open conflict with competing militant groups.

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<sup>51</sup> Carlos P. Romulo, *The Meaning of Bandung*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 1-11.

<sup>52</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 146, 154-156.

Fearing that the Chinese, antagonized by these remnants of the Nationalist army, would launch an invasion, Burma petitioned the American government to stop supporting them, which it refused to do. American foreign policy could not abandon the Nationalist cause. The China-First lobby in Congress would not tolerate any decline in U.S. support for Chiang Kai-shek and the “Chi-Nats,” no matter how useless they were.<sup>53</sup> Incensed, Burma became a vocal opponent of SEATO from its founding, and spoke passionately against the United States at the Bandung Conference a year later.

American anti-communist policy in Southeast Asia led the United States to support Chinese Nationalists in Burma. This blatant violation of Burmese sovereignty cost the United States a prime ally in the Third World. The Burmese were afraid of a Communist insurgency and takeover. They, like Thailand, could have become part of the Third World contingent of SEATO. But the United States, unable to recognize the validity of Burmese complaints, drove the Burmese into the Non-Alignment camp. The United States failed to balance the needs of a newly independent Third World country with the needs of the Cold War. Cold War policy overrode decolonization policy, at the cost of a Third World ally.<sup>54</sup>

Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, was perhaps the most powerful Non-Aligned player in Southeast Asia. Leading the largest new nation in the world, Nehru could have been a powerful ally in the Cold War, serving to counterbalance China’s hegemony in the region. India could have provided the manpower to match China’s ample reserves and served as the face of US-Asian foreign relations. Though Nehru’s socialism did predispose him in some ways to the

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas, *Ike's Bluff*, 153-155.

<sup>54</sup> Callahan, *Making Enemies*, 145, 150-153.

Soviet-Sino bloc, India was not an active member of either Cold War bloc.<sup>55</sup> He was the leader of the Neutralist/Non-Alignment Movement amongst Third World nations.

Nehru's theory of Non-Alignment stemmed from a desire for stability. Nehru wanted himself, and by extension India, to be a force for peace through stability.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, any aggressive actions that would upset the balance of power between the Soviets and the Americans were to be avoided and condemned. If any one side grew too powerful and upset the status quo, nuclear war could break out. At the same time, Third World nations had their own needs outside of the Cold War, and would always be better served by avoiding entangling alliances with the world superpowers. Non-alignment meant creating a safe space for the development of Third World national identities and economies.

This made Nehru the odd man out politically. It would lead him to criticize the West during the Hungarian Crisis of 1956 for supporting the independence movement rather than the Soviets for suppressing the independence movement.<sup>57</sup> By his logic, the Soviets were maintaining the balance of power by keeping Hungary behind the Iron Curtain, while the U.S. was upsetting the balance of by trying to separate Hungary from the Soviet sphere. Nevertheless, Nehru would remain critical of both blocs throughout his life and continued to call upon Third World nations to embrace the neutralist message and to reject the Cold War dichotomy.

This philosophy made the American actions in Southeast Asia unacceptable. By forging an alliance in Southeast Asia, the United States was threatening to upset the balance of power in Asia. Various Southeast Asian nations wanted to be excluded from the ever-growing Cold War.

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<sup>55</sup> P F Power, ed., *India's Non-Alignment Policy: Strengths and Weaknesses (Problems in Asian Civilization.)* (Boston: DC Heath, 1968), 9-16.

<sup>56</sup> Ernest W. Lefever, "Nehru, Nasser and Nkrumah on Neutralism" in *Neutralism and Nonalignment: the New States in World Affairs*, ed. Laurence Martin (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 97-98.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 105-107.

Otherwise, the nations involved would become simple puppets, proxies for the superpowers' games. Their independence would be rendered meaningless, and their people would suffer as they had under colonialism, with their needs subordinated to American foreign policy needs.

China would likewise be alienated by such an action, as SEATO would clearly be intended to encircle China much in the same way that the Soviet Union was encircled by NATO. Nehru feared that this would push China to be more belligerent and more pro-Soviet. He considered China as part of the de-colonized, un-industrialized Third World, despite its clear Communist ideology.<sup>58</sup> Nehru's view contradicted the Western view of a massive, cohesive Sino-Soviet bloc. China was its own master in Nehru's view, and needed to be respected if there was to be peace in Asia. If not, then China would come to represent a serious threat to Indian and Southeast Asian security.

In addition, a US-centered alliance would take away from the importance of Asia and Africa. To Nehru, Asian and African nations should not be second-rate members of an American dominated alliance, as they had been second-rate members of the old European empires. The US was the natural leader of its own alliance, and Nehru believed that the time for Asia to lead itself had arrived, rather than have another "white" country lead the "benighted" people of Asia. Particularly, his status as leader and promoter of Asian and African interests prevented him from becoming a figurehead of the American effort. Though it seems unlikely that Nehru would have ever signed on to an American anti-communist effort, by creating SEATO, the United States pushed India further into the neutralist camp. If the United States had been more subtle, and had allowed China or the Soviet Union to aggravate Nehru, he might have become more receptive to American goals.

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<sup>58</sup> Wayne A. Wilcox, *India, Pakistan and the Rise of China* (New York: Walker and Company, 1964), 49-51.

Indonesia, under the leadership of Sukarno, was another major player in Southeast Asia. The United States had an uncomfortable relationship with Sukarno. Like most nationalist leaders at the time, Sukarno tried to play the Cold War superpowers against each other.<sup>59</sup> Several times during the Eisenhower administration Indonesia was asked to affirm its support for the free world, and every time it returned to its Neutralist stance.<sup>60</sup> Sukarno also desired to supplant Nehru as the spokesman of the Third World. The Bandung Conference would prove to be his opportunity. Indonesia would become the site of the Bandung Conference. Nationalist leaders from all over the Third World representative of the non-white nations travelled to Indonesia to promote their interests and defy the Cold War superpowers. It was the high point of Sukarno's career. His rule would slowly be eroded by external pressures from the CIA and the internal pressures of Indonesian politics due to his own excesses.<sup>61</sup>

Southeast Asia had its own crop of native born power-brokers in the 1950's. These leaders and the people they represented were mainly concerned with creating the countries they had just freed. They desired to make their own way in the world, free of the external control and domination they had known for so long. They also wanted to be respected as nations, which required wealth and national prestige. Industrialization and de-colonization were at the heart of these emerging national programs.<sup>62</sup>

Years of racism and paternalism had driven a wedge between these countries and their first-world counterparts. The British and the French had almost no credibility amongst these

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<sup>59</sup> Robert J. McMahon, " 'The Point of No Return': The Eisenhower Administration and Indonesia, 1953-1960," in *The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War*, eds. Kathryn C. Statler and Andrew L. Johns (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 75, 80-86.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 76-77.

<sup>61</sup> Helen-Louise Hunter, *Sukarno and the Indonesian Coup: The Untold Story* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Security International, 2007), 5, 13-17.

<sup>62</sup> Lefever, "Nehru, Nasser and Nkrumah on Neutralism," in Martin, 94-95.

nations. This distrust was extended to many of the ideas they espoused. Industrialization under the colonial regimes had been aimed at the extraction of wealth for the home country. The parallel processes of de-colonization and Cold War escalation would prove problematic for all involved. These processes resulted in serious conflicts in the region, such as the French Indochina insurgency attempting to expunge the sobriquet “French.”

This conflict in Vietnam illustrates one of the fatal flaws in the American approach to defense: Eisenhower’s military theory. Eisenhower envisioned NATO as an extension of the Western alliance of World War II, which it was. This vision was of industrial democratic nations joining together in a common defense against a more organized and monolithic foe. NATO tanks and troops would fight pitched battles over the German plains, with armor leading the way. This was why the regular army was maintained in Europe. It was the threat of this powerful image of combat, combined with the massive American nuclear arsenal, which was meant to deter any Soviet aggression.

This model could not be applied to the Third World, especially Vietnam. The nations involved could not produce the militaries envisioned by NATO and subsequently SEATO strategists. Moreover, these Third World nations were not fighting pitched battles over industrial bases and resources. Guerilla warfare was the calling card of Third World Communists. Battles were waged over the loyalty of villages, not centers of production. Many of the Communist guerillas dispersed their forces, making pitched combat impossible. The terrain worked against such plans as well, with jungles and wetlands making traditional military maneuvers virtually worthless. The war against such a foe would stagnate, which violated one of the cardinal rules of

Eisenhower's conflict theory.<sup>63</sup> Vietnam was not a set-piece battlefield, which is what SEATO was designed to fight.<sup>64</sup> Instead, the Vietnamese Communists employed a type of infiltration that could not be easily met with overwhelming military might.

The founding of SEATO did not have the intended effect amongst the countries of Southeast Asia. In fact, far from encouraging countries to join the alliance against Communism, the nations of Southeast Asia sought to assert their own power. Asian nations had just regained their independence, and many wanted to make their new political power felt. They did not want to be pulled between the Soviet and American spheres of influence. They defied the bipolar system of nations that was generally accepted in the wake of World War Two. New paths were opening up, with the promise of sovereignty and freedom.

The Bandung Conference was a direct response to the founding of SEATO a year earlier. Held in Indonesia, the Bandung conference was a meeting of the newly independent nations of Africa and Asia. These nations wanted to demonstrate their authority in the face of the American policy. This did not make them friends of the Soviet bloc, but it did undermine the alliance that SEATO sought to create. Men like Sukarno used this conference as an opportunity to showcase their nationalist credentials, standing up to the major powers, and flaunting their countries

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<sup>63</sup> Perry, *Partners in Command*, 46. The three cardinal rules of Eisenhower's military theory from WWII: never fight unless you have to, never fight alone, and never fight for long.

<sup>64</sup> Essentially, SEATO is a grand military alliance like NATO. NATO is designed to pool the resources of its members into providing a larger army than any member state could support on their own. The stationing of US troops and tanks in Europe and the continuation of drills and exercises implies that these troops would be used in ways similar to that of World War II. Therefore, SEATO would theoretically serve the same function, which means its main function is to provide for a larger traditional military. This should not imply that Eisenhower did not recognize the problems of a land war in Southeast Asia. See Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 28-30. He does imply that he had no real alternative solution to the issue. It was SEATO or nothing, and Ike chose SEATO.

freedom. Such theatrics would prove extremely popular with many of the people of the Third World.<sup>65</sup>

The conference would also signal the loss of the Third World to the Non-Alignment Movement. The Soviet-American conflict was viewed poorly by Third world countries, who wished to be independent world players rather than subordinate allies in a larger conflict. Non-Alignment was a means of countering the Eurocentric Cold War conflict. Africans and Asians would no longer be pawns in the great games of northern superpowers.<sup>66</sup> The conference was attended exclusively by non-white representatives, emphasizing the racial divide between the Third World and the Soviet-American world.

The conference was a major headache for the United States. The conference focused on problems of peace, de-colonialism, and race. The United States' creation of a new military alliance, its cozy relationship with many of the former colonial masters of Southeast Asia, and its domestic difficulties on race left it wide open to serious criticism.<sup>67</sup> The Soviet Union was also criticized for its role in militarizing the world and its opposition to important cultural markers such as religion. With China in attendance, the United States saw the conference as a cover for expanding Communist influence and ideology under the guise of de-colonization. This inability to separate local needs from Communist ideology rendered the United States tone-deaf to

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<sup>65</sup> Jason Parker, "Small Victory, Missed Chance: The Eisenhower Administration, the Bandung Conference and the Turning of the Cold War" in *The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War*, eds. Kathryn C. Statler and Andrew L. Johns (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 156-161.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 156-161.

<sup>67</sup> Fred Kaplan, *1959: the Year Everything Changed* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2010), 126-128.

Southeast Asian interests.<sup>68</sup> This tone-deafness can be attributed to Eisenhower's service in World War II, and its impact on his thinking and the thinking of his peers and aides.

Eisenhower was a culturally literate man. He had had to negotiate the finer distinction of European identity politics throughout his military career. He was aware of the history and culture that made Europeans distinct from one another. But Eisenhower's education was almost entirely Eurocentric. His education had turned his focus to the next great war in Europe. Though he had spent time abroad, notably in Panama and the Philippines, these excursions were dominated by European matters. Eisenhower spent the majority of his time in Panama studying under Fox Conner in preparation for European tank warfare. His time in the Philippines was more about handling MacArthur than about handling Filipino dissent. In addition, the Philippines can be considered an outlier amongst Asian former colonies, as the Philippines relationship with the United States was much better than most other colony/colonist relationships. When Eisenhower was in areas that would be considered the Third World, like North Africa, his main concern was not local indigenous support but local colonial support, that of Vichy France in the case of North Africa.<sup>69</sup>

Eisenhower, and the generation of politicians and bureaucrats that served him, was trained around a Eurocentric model of the world. Europe dominated the world, with major conflicts emanating from its shores. Almost all of Africa and Asia belong to some European power. This mindset served them incredibly well during the European campaign of World War II and in the post-war development of Western Europe. But it slowly became a liability as the Cold War expanded into the newly independent Third World. Slowly, Eisenhower and his staff lost

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<sup>68</sup> This does not imply that the Soviet Union was better attuned to the needs of the Third World. Rather, the focus of the paper is the problems in the American policy under President Eisenhower.

<sup>69</sup> Perry, *Partners in Command*, 138-142.

some of their credentials as international savants. Dulles was labelled a victim of “pactomania” for his insistence on creating defensive pacts around the world, regardless of the value of the pacts.<sup>70</sup> He insisted that SEATO was “an essential part of [...] the deterrent power” against China, despite being essentially an American puppet.<sup>71</sup> This disconnect between the hype and the realities of the alliance would prove too great to sustain. The world they were working with had evolved thanks to the de-colonization underway. They, regrettably, could not do likewise.

Many of the nations at the conference would become important members of the Non-Alignment Movement. This was by no means the desired effect of the SEATO initiative. The Americans struggled to recognize the importance of de-colonialization to these nations. They continually tried to impose a Cold War perspective on all actions taken in the Third World. They leaned upon their Filipino allies to insert anti-communist rhetoric into the final documents of the conference. Intrusions of this type made the United States few friends in the Third World. Similar mistakes would be made in the Suez Crisis two year later, when Eisenhower would denounce “Red colonialism” instead of colonialism.<sup>72</sup> Eisenhower and his administration grasped the idea behind what the Third World wanted, but could only extricate it from the Cold War with great difficulty. Only rarely would America feel safe enough from potential Communist subversion to discard the rhetoric of the Cold War and address local concerns directly.

SEATO did have its benefits. The alliance may have deterred another unilateral invasion from China, a la Korea. Fears of China had fueled much of the fears around Asia in the Cold War. The alliance did provide defensive assurances to several important countries, especially

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<sup>70</sup> Hoopes, *The Devil and John Foster Dulles*, 241.

<sup>71</sup> Richards Goold-Adams, *John Foster Dulles: A Reappraisal*, (New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, INC, 1962), 166.

<sup>72</sup> Parker, “Small Victory, Missed Chance” in Statler and Johns, 157-161.

Thailand, which was concerning about the spillover effects of the Communist insurgency in former Indochina. It served as a vehicle for American economic aid to the member nations, which bought goodwill and provided some economic growth amongst the Third World members. Thailand in particular came to rely on American support, being the most vulnerable member in the alliance due to its proximity to Vietnam. This resulted in special treaty agreements and protections for Thailand even after SEATO was dissolved.<sup>73</sup>

Yet SEATO failed to prevent the expansion of Communist control into Southeast Asia. Vietnam and the other former subjects of French Indochina all ultimately fell to Communist militants who instituted violent and repressive regimes. Hundreds of thousands of Americans went to war without support from its major allies.<sup>74</sup> SEATO was never directly deployed in the battle for South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. During the Nixon Presidency, China was opened up and began to overtly drift away from the Soviet Union. By the middle of the 1970's, SEATO had become anachronistic, the reality on the ground in Southeast Asia having rendered it moot. Criticism developed at home and abroad of the alliance.<sup>75</sup>

SEATO was disbanded in 1977, with little more than a few cultural events and economic ties to its name. The American cause in Southeast Asia had been lost by then, and many Americans sought to sever their ties to the region to avoid any future conflicts. SEATO's death illustrates the limits of the Eisenhower administration vision. Eisenhower, influenced by his experiences in World War Two and his work developing NATO, applied those lessons to the Cold War arena of Southeast Asia. This fateful miscalculation plagued the efforts of the

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<sup>73</sup> Buszynski "Thailand and the Manila Pact," *The World Today* Vol. 36, No. 2 (Feb., 1980), 45-51. Accessed April 8, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40395167>

<sup>74</sup> It should be noted that many countries did send troops to aid the US war effort, but these efforts were focused on non-combat support roles, like technicians and nurses.

<sup>75</sup> Buszynski "Thailand and the Manila Pact," *The World Today* Vol. 36, No. 2 (Feb., 1980), 45-51. Accessed April 8, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40395167>

Eisenhower administration to win the Cold War battle for hearts and minds in the Third World. Unable to recognize the serious differences between Communist threats in Europe and Nationalist needs in Asia, the administration alienated potential allies and misapplied the NATO alliance model on Southeast Asia. Subsequent administration would struggle to craft a substitute policy for the failed experiment of SEATO.

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