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History Lessons from SEATO to the Newer Regional Security Alliances

ABSTRACT

There are compellingly valid reasons to revisit the two decades-long history and diplomatic experience of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization from the 1950s to the 1970s. The emergence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which some analysts believe may turn into an “Asian NATO” or a “new SEATO” has made it worthwhile to study how previous multilateral alliances in Asia were formed, how they functioned, and subsequently dissolved. The revival of interest in SEATO is seen in new literatures that explore its workings, such as its operational-level contingency plans and counter-insurgency policies. The author reconstructs a lifecycle of SEATO using materials which were unavailable to scholars studying the organization from the 1950s through the 1980s and

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presents a nuanced assessment of the grouping.

There has been in recent years an emerging interest in the possibility of a multilateral military alliance in Asia, for instance the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue morphing into an “Asian NATO.”¹ As such, it is therefore useful to study how previous multilateral alliances in the context of Asia were formed, how they functioned, and subsequently dissolved. SEATO would be the first to come to mind.

The Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty (or the “Manila Pact” for short) signed on September 8, 1954 and its creation, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) have received meager scholarly attention compared to other key events and developments during the duration of the Cold War, such as the Geneva Conference in 1954 and the Bandung Conference in 1955. Most of the assessments of SEATO were written contemporaneously during the years when SEATO was still in existence or not long after its demise. There are only two

In this article, Ang Cheng Guan draws upon his recent book, *The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation* (London: Routledge, 2021).

¹ See for examples, “Will Quad fly? The Answer is in Beijing,” *The Straits Times*, November 17, 2017; “Beijing’s ‘Asian NATO’ Maxim on Quad is Structural,” *Pacific Forum*, PacNet #61, November 22, 2019; “‘Indo-Pacific Nato’: China’s Wang Yi slams US-led Quad as underlying security risk at Malaysia meeting,” *South China Morning Post*, October 13, 2020; “Quad gets China’s attention,” *The Straits Times*, October 16, 2020; “Could a US-led Quad add up to an Asian Nato against China?” *South China Morning Post*, December 25, 2020; Satake Tomohiko, “Institutionalising the Quad?” *The Diplomat*, January 19, 2021; “How US plans for first Quad summit with leaders of Japan, Australia and India could be first steps towards ‘mini-Nato’ to counter Chinese influence,” *South China Morning Post*, February 7, 2021; Jagannath Panda, “The Elusive Quest for an ‘Asian Nato,’” *Strategic Analysis* 45, No. 1, 2021, 57–66; Wiliam Choong, “Why the Quad will Endure?” *9Dashline*, April 13, 2021; “‘Old’ Quad strategy risks provoking China: Malaysia’s Mahathir,” *Nikkei Asia*, May 20, 2021; “Don’t take on China alone, says ex-Australia PM Kevin Rudd,” May 29, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-57264249>.



single-authored books on SEATO.² The first post-SEATO publication was Leszek Buszynski's *SEATO: The Failure of an Alliance Strategy*. This was also the first single-authored book on SEATO, which originated as his political science doctoral thesis.³ As the title of the book clearly stated, in Buszynski's assessment, SEATO was a failure. Buszynski's account and analysis, published in 1983, would become the dominant metanarrative till today. As one reviewer John Girling put it, "his text can be seen not only as a well-constructed theoretical exercise (a study in international relations), but also a perceptive analysis of a practical experience, which can be drawn on in discussion of current affairs."⁴ In the last decade or so, there appeared to be a revival of interest in the academic study of SEATO. There were four publications, two by historians and two by political scientists. Taking them in chronological order, in 2012, the military historian Brian Farrell published a book chapter focusing on SEATO's PLAN 4—"the military defence of Southeast Asia against Chinese aggression," which he described as "a metaphor for SEATO and the Cold War at large."⁵ In the same year, Damien Fenton published the first full-length single-authored study

² An edited volume on SEATO was published in 1962. See George Modelski, ed., *SEATO: Six Studies* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1962).

³ Leszek Buszynski, *SEATO: The Failure of an Alliance Strategy* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983). Buszynski's book was preceded by two of his articles: "Thailand and the Manila Pact," *The World Today* 36, No. 2 (February 1980), Chatham House: The Royal Institute of International Affairs; "SEATO: Why It Survived until 1977 and Why It was Abolished," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, No. 2 (September 1981). That it was published in JSEAS indicates that SEATO has passed into history.

⁴ See book review in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 16, No. 1 (March 1985).

⁵ Brian P. Farrell, "Alphabet Soup and Nuclear War: China and the Cold War in Southeast Asia," in *Cold War Southeast Asia*, ed. Malcolm H. Murfett, (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2012), 81.

on SEATO since Leszek Buszynski in 1983.⁶ The book has its origins in Fenton's doctoral thesis in military history. According to Fenton, while there was no denying that in the latter half of its existence, SEATO was "overshadowed and indeed ultimately overwhelmed by the Vietnam War," adding that, "the actual importance of the organization to Western defence strategy in Southeast Asia during the first ten years of its existence" was under-appreciated by scholars and analysts alike.⁷



The leaders of some of the SEATO countries in front of the Congress building in Manila, hosted by Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos on October 24, 1966. Left to Right: Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky (South Vietnam), Prime Minister Harold Holt (Australia), President Park Chung Hee (South Korea), President Marcos, Prime Minister Keith Holyoake (New Zealand), Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu (South Vietnam), Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn (Thailand), and President Lyndon B. Johnson (United States). South Vietnam was not a member of SEATO. Image source: Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

⁶ Damien Fenton, *To Cage the Red Dragon: SEATO and the Defence of Southeast Asia 1955-1965* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

⁷ *Ibid*, 2-3.



In short, SEATO was not an outright failure as Buszynski and the “overly simplistic” orthodox view described it.⁸ More than any other scholar, Fenton focused in detail on the eight operational-level contingency plans and the subject of counter-insurgency.

Damien Fenton described this omission or neglect as a “blind spot” in the historiography of the Cold War.⁹ The reason for the lack of interest in SEATO is possibly that it was perceived to be a failed organization quite early in its existence and therefore did not merit much scholarly attention. In a Working Paper published in 1969, Astri Suhrke-Goldstein began his essay with the statement “the most remarkable aspect of SEATO in 1968 was that it still existed.”¹⁰ This negative view of SEATO continues to be the dominant perception until this day. For example, Peter Ho, writing in 2011, described SEATO as the “much maligned” organization, seen “as a cat’s paw of the external powers.”¹¹ William T. Tow described SEATO as a “brief and ill-fated effort” of the United States.¹² This narrative was challenged by Damien Fenton in his 2012 book, *To Cage the Red Dragon: SEATO and the Defence of Southeast Asia 1955-1965*, the first full-length and single authored study of SEATO since 1983. According to Fenton, the

⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁹ Ibid, 1.

¹⁰ Astri Suhrke-Goldstein, *SEATO: Rethinking Regionalism*, Working Paper No. 10, Department of International Relations, The Australian National University, 1969, p. 1.

¹¹ Peter Ho, “FPDA at 40: Still Effective and Relevant,” *RSIS Commentaries*, No. 179 (December 2011).

¹² William T. Tow, “Rebalancing and Order Building: Strategy or Illusion?” in *The New US Strategy towards Asia: Adapting to the American Pivot*, ed. William T. Tow and Douglas Stuart (London: Routledge, 2015), 33.

prevailing view of SEATO as a failure was “overly simplistic.”¹³ It is not my intention here to condemn or exonerate the organization. It is my view that there are lessons to learn from both successes as well as failures in the past. But we do need to have as accurate an account as possible of the life cycle of SEATO before any lessons can be drawn.

Current discussion on ‘alliances’ in the International Relations literature may perhaps also offer one or more lens for us to understand SEATO from a different perspective. Political scientists/International Relations specialists, however, have a very dated understanding of SEATO. The ‘Alliance’ literature that Evelyn Goh and Ryo Sahashi remind us of is “large and well developed,” largely focused on “alliance management” and less so on “why alliances are formed and when they dissolve.” Furthermore, much of the writings are focused on “questions of alliance formation, and management” in the context of “military conflict or other coordinated use of force.”¹⁴ Many studies on alliance politics also “start from an explicitly or implicitly U.S.-centric point of view” and never moved “beyond that narrow focus.”¹⁵ Given the centrality of the United States in SEATO it is natural, if not inevitable, to focus on the Washington angle. There is also the practical reason that American archival sources are much more accessible than the Asian members.

¹³ Fenton, *To Cage the Red Dragon*, 3.

¹⁴ See for example, Evan N. Resnick, “Hang Together or Hang Separately? Evaluating Rival Theories of Wartime Alliance Cohesion,” *Security Studies* 22, No. 4 (2013): 672–706.

¹⁵ Evelyn Goh and Ryo Sahashi, “Worldviews on the United States, Alliances, and the Changing International Order: An Introduction,” *Contemporary Politics* 26, No. 4 (2020): 372.

Why States Joined the SEATO

In the early years after World War Two ended, and especially after the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April 1949, a few East and Southeast Asian countries, as well as Australia and New Zealand, began to search for a new regional security arrangement. The United States, which had emerged from the war by far the most powerful country in the world, was core to all the proposals. The United States, too, was exploring the most suitable form of regional security arrangement(s) that met its own interests. What emerged in the end was a combination of separate security arrangements with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and with both Australia and New Zealand on the one hand, and SEATO on the other. There are two views with regards to SEATO: One end, represented by Nathaniel Peffer argued that “a Southeast Asia organization in 1954 is a rhetorical device, not a political fact”. The other, represented by William Henderson argued that “the Manila Pact was reasonably successful . . . in basing major elements of its policy on the premise that effective regional organization in the area is a practical political possibility, the United States stands on solid ground.”¹⁶

As Stephen Walt highlights, states ally to balance against threats.¹⁷ The East and Southeast Asian states saw communist China and the possibility of a resurgent Japanese militarism as threats. Washington was however more focused on Europe and the Soviet threat during this period—thus the swift creation of NATO in 1949. Until the

¹⁶ See Nathaniel Peffer, “Regional Security in Southeast Asia,” *International Organization* 8, No. 3 (August 1954): 311–315; and William Henderson, “The Development of Regionalism in Southeast Asia,” *International Organization* 9, No. 4 (November 1955): 463–476.

¹⁷ See Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, No. 4 (Spring 1985): 3–43.

Korean War broke out in June 1950, the United States did not perceive China to be a serious threat while Japan was then under American occupation. Multilateral security arrangement in Asia was apparently too difficult to establish compared to the ‘hub-and-spoke’ or bilateral approach to maintaining regional security.



U.S. postage stamp in honor of SEATO, 1960.

SEATO as a regional security model did not feature in the discussions until the fall of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. Within four months after the French defeat in Vietnam, SEATO was formed. The brainchild of John Foster Dulles (then-US Secretary of State), it was clearly a ‘rush job.’ To Dulles, it was a work a progress. Senator John Sparkman, a member of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, during the Hearing on “US Commitment to SEATO” on March 6, 1974 recalled a conversation with Dulles when SEATO was set up. Sparkman noted that SEATO had “a weakness,” and that “even though it was a Southeast Asian organization there was little Asian support in it. It looked like the big powers, the United States, Britain, and France. It



didn't have enough Asian nations tied into it." To which Dulles responded to the effect he had done the best he could.¹⁸ In 1954, the only other independent Southeast Asian countries besides Thailand and the Philippines were Indonesia and Burma. While both declined to join SEATO, they adopted a neutral attitude towards its formation. Malaya and Singapore in 1954 were still under the British. Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman was, in fact, keen for Malaya to join SEATO when the country achieved its independence from Britain in August 1957, but for domestic reasons was unable to do so. Neither did Singapore join when it became independent in 1965. Both countries also did not think that it was necessary to join SEATO for their security. When asked in the 1980s, the Tengku said that "we knew, in any case, if war were to break out in Malaya, the United States was duty bound to come to our defence because it would not allow the American enemy to control us."¹⁹

SEATO has been described as a collective security organization. An official SEATO publication dated September 1965 and entitled "Story of SEATO"²⁰ opens with a description of 'Collective Security':

Collective Security is a new name for one of the oldest concepts in international relations. Like-minded nations have always tended to band together for mutual defence in the face of a

¹⁸ "US Commitment to SEATO," Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Third Congress, Second Session, March 6, 1974 (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974), 9.

¹⁹ See Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 76.

²⁰ *Story of SEATO* (Bangkok: Public Information Office, SEATO Headquarters, September 8, 1965). For a brief discussion on the concept of "Collective Security," see David Capie and Paul Evans, *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2002), 53-58.

common danger. Today the common danger faced by free nations is the threat of Communist aggression and subversion.

Collective Security means more than promises of assistance in time of danger. Nations which are joined in collective security pacts enjoy the mutual confidence which enables them to consult continuously on the means of their defence. Nor do they limit their consultations to military matters. They work frankly and cordially together in the economic, social and cultural fields, with the aim of raising the living, health and education standards of their peoples. In this way, they strengthen their free institutions which are based on individual liberty and human dignity.

In their study of 'Alliances,'²¹ Evelyn Goh and Ryo Sahashi identified three "broad types of alliance motivations"—(a) threat-based; (b) miscellaneous motivations such post-war membership of international society (particularly for defeated powers) to other identity-based motivations; and (c) transactional or instrumental. We can find all three types amongst the SEATO members.

SEATO has often been compared unfavorably with NATO. That is barking up the wrong tree. From the very start, it was very clear that SEATO was not modeled on NATO; it was never envisaged to be an Asian version of NATO. NATO was based on the "indivisibility of threats to the collectivity." There was also the "requirement of an unconditional collective response." SEATO did not.²² As George

²¹ Evelyn Goh and Ryo Sahashi, "Worldviews on the United States, Alliances, and the Changing International Order: An Introduction," *Contemporary Politics* 26, No. 4 (2020): 371-383.



Modelski explains, “There are some other reasons why NATO cannot serve as the prototype of alliances. . . .Other alliances, such as SEATO, have been more obviously a relationship between one powerful state and a number of smaller states in need of guarantees and protection. In a more unequal arrangement of this kind, strategic debate is less pertinent, and the alliance as such recedes into the background while other forms of cooperation such as aid or anti-subversion efforts assume prominence. Aid is now the preferred method of influencing weaker powers and it is, too, an important method of dealing with subversion. That is why the debate over aid has been so prominent in the Southeast Asian scene, while absent from Europe since the early 1950s.”²³ Scholars have not paid sufficient attention to the less known non-military activities of SEATO. As SEATO Secretary-General Jesus Vargas reminded us, “SEATO is not engaged entirely on the promotion of measures to ensure its defence against communism; it is not purely military. We are also promoting economic measures . . . we have been promoting, under the SEATO aegis, projects in practically all fields of activities,” including health and education.²⁴

On the matters of “alliance management” and alliance cohesion, one will have to focus on Laos during the period of SEATO. The year 1959 was the key moment as it marked the intensification of the communist armed struggle in Vietnam, which involved Laos. The ‘architect’ of SEATO, John Foster Dulles also died in April that year.

²² David Capie and Paul Evans, *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2002), 57–58, fn. 20.

²³ George Modelski, “The Study of Alliances: A Review,” *Conflict Resolution*, VII, No. 4 (December 1963): 771–772.

²⁴ Record of Conversation between the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and Lieutenant-General Jesus Vargas, Secretary General of SEATO, held at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, November 17, 1970, FCO 15/1320.

SEATO's supposed failure to intervene in the Laotian crisis is often regarded as the point which marked the decline of SEATO as a credible collective security organization. Developments in Laos were more complicated than is often made out to be. It was not a simple issue of a few member countries wanting to jump into the fray and some others did not. The Royal Laotian government, in fact, did not formally invite SEATO to intervene.

The problem of Laos can be understood by referring to the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu, who said that "warfare is the greatest affair of state, the basis of life and death, the way to survival or extinction. It must be thoroughly pondered and analyzed." Thus "subjugating the enemy's army without fighting is true pinnacle of excellence."²⁵ Mixed with the talk of intervention, there was a recognition that Laos was not a conducive place to fight a war and perhaps a negotiated settlement would be the lesser of two evils. Furthermore, as Robert Farley noted (although in a different context), "Developing a collective response to salami slicing is always more difficult than to more straightforward aggression . . ." ²⁶ Before 1962, international attention was on Laos. After 1962, Laos moved out of the center stage to be replaced by Vietnam and the Vietnam War. The United States justified its intervention in Vietnam because of its SEATO obligation.

'Laos' and 'Vietnam' present a case study of 'alliance cohesion' which is defined as "the ability of alliance partners to agree upon goals, strategy, and tactics, and to coordinate activities directed towards those

²⁵ Quoted in Ralph D. Sawyer (translated), *Sun Tzu: Art of War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 167 and 177.

²⁶ Robert Farley, "The Missing Ingredient for an Asian NATO," *The Diplomat*, April 24, 2014.



ends.” There are two dimensions—attitudinal (referring to shared goals and threat perception) and behavioral (referring to “the degree to which alliance members cooperate and suppress their conflicts with other members of the alliance.”)²⁷ As Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein observe, “multilateralism is a particular demanding form of international cooperation. It requires a strong sense of collective identity in addition to shared interests,”²⁸ which in the real world is not easy to consistently achieve. Achieving cooperation in world politics is difficult, even amongst allies which one would expect would have the strongest incentives to cooperate, for example the United States and Britain. Indeed, John Mearsheimer argues that theory/assumptions of collective security was completely flawed and “historical record provides little support for the theory.”²⁹ Galia Press-Barnathan was of the view that an organization, such as SEATO was doomed to fail from the start because of power disparities (between the big power and its prospective partners, and amongst the prospective partners themselves which give rise to burden sharing issues). There is also the “motivation of the hegemon”³⁰ to consider, in this case the United States, which was single-minded about intervening in Vietnam. Marina E. Henke in

²⁷ This is summarized from Jiyun Kih, “Capability Building and Alliance Cohesion: Comparing the US-Japan and US-Philippines alliance,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, No. 4 (2020):357.

²⁸ Christopher Hemmer and Peter J. Katzenstein, “Why is There No NATO in Asia? Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism,” *International Organisation* 56, No. 3 (Summer 2002): 575-576.

²⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security* 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95): 5-49. See particularly pp. 26-37.

³⁰ Galia Press-Barnathan, “The lure of Regional Security Arrangements: The United States and Regional Security Cooperation in Asia and Europe,” *Security Studies* 10, No. 2(2000): 49-97.

her study of allied cooperation having found that states rarely have similar “intrinsic preferences and preference intensities” when it comes to the launching of any multilateral intervention. Thus, all cooperation is often “negotiated” as most states “do not join military coalitions at their own initiative but are bargained into these coalitions by pivotal states.” Also, “relatively weak states in fact are often able to drive a hard bargain.”³¹ The Thai experience during the Laos crisis is a standout example. That said, ultimately, in the words of Konthi Suphamongkhon (who succeeded Pote Sarasin as Secretary-General of SEATO in 1964), “when membership is disparate and composed of great and small nations, the latter having to rely on the former, the organization is bound to be at the mercy of the whip and whim of the larger nations.”³² As Pote Sarasin said, “The trouble is too many people expect too much from SEATO . . . It was never meant to solve all problems.”³³ Assessing the cohesiveness of SEATO is thus like seeing the glass half full or empty.

Why the SEATO Alliance Ended

Alliances generally dissolve or end “when the existential threat posed to the survival and territorial integrity of members ceases to exist,”³⁴ or

³¹ Marina E. Henke, *Constructing Allied Cooperation: Diplomacy, Payments and Power in Multilateral Military Coalition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 151.

³² Quoted in Amitav Acharya, “‘Why is There no NATO in Asia?’ The Normative Origins of Asian Multilateralism,” Paper No. 05-05, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University (July 2005): 38-39.

³³ *Cincinnati Post and Times-Star*, September 27, 1962, p. 62, quoted in Kim, Benedict Sang-Joon, *The United States and SEATO*, unpublished PhD thesis, Yale University, 1964.

³⁴ Tarik Oguzlu, “On Alliances in the World Today,” *Daily Sabah*, February 11, 2020. According to George Liska, “Alliances are against, and only derivatively,



as Stephen Walt showed, when members' identity politics and strategic objectives no longer converge.³⁵ We would recall that the purpose of SEATO was the containment of, what was perceived to be, an expansionist China bent on supporting and spreading communism in the region. As David Capie and Paul Evans crisply put it, "The fundamental basis of collective security is the idea of all against one."³⁶ In the early 1970s, while China was no longer considered a clear and present danger, it was still not a friend at least in the eyes of the Southeast Asian countries. Writing in 1977, American diplomat Edwin W. Martin recalled that the end of the war in Vietnam and the withdrawal of the American presence there marked "a realignment of power' in Southeast Asia—"the old rivalry between China and the United States has become a relationship of cautious rapprochement . . ." The rapprochement culminated in the establishment of diplomatic relations on January 1, 1979.³⁷ The perception of China changed, albeit very gradually, from around 1970–71, notably the historic visit of a team of American table tennis players to China in April 1971, and most significantly, the July 1971 announcement that President Richard Nixon would visit China the following year. Thus, the beginning of the slow unraveling of SEATO.

Everyone familiar with SEATO will know of Pakistan and France—notorious for being the two 'sleeping' members in SEATO.

for someone, or something." See George Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1962), 12.

³⁵ See Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, No. 4 (Spring 1985):3–43.

³⁶ David Capie and Paul Evans, *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2002), 53.

³⁷ Edwin W. Martin, *Southeast Asia and China: The End of Containment* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977), 1.

Pakistan was the first member to withdraw from SEATO in 1972 but chose the timing very deliberately out of consideration for the Americans. Similarly France, despite not having attended any SEATO Council meeting since 1967 (because SEATO's focus on the Vietnam War was incompatible with French foreign policy), had continued to pay her dues punctually and only chose to leave SEATO in 1974 as unobtrusively as possible. The difference between Pakistan and France was that the latter was withdrawing from the organization but not the Treaty.

A question which needs to be addressed is why SEATO did not, or was not able to, re-invent itself, such as NATO was able to do after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The idea of a SEATO review was mooted at the 13th SEATO Council meeting in 1968 and achieved the concurrence of the members at the 14th meeting the following year. However, members dragged their feet over this issue because of the on-going Vietnam War.

This may be a good place to briefly mention the psychological dimension of SEATO. The reputation (even though it was not always positive) and psychological demonstration effect of SEATO is often overlooked. If SEATO had been such a failure as often portrayed, why would the communist side be so adamant to remove Laos from it? Before the conclusion of the 1962 Geneva Conference, the Chinese were indeed concerned that Laos would join SEATO and the United States could turn Laos into a military base. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai had expressed concern about China being encircled by a hostile military bloc, specifically SEATO.³⁸ Qingfei Yin in her recent study highlights that Beijing saw the "American-sponsored SEATO" as a threat and thus

³⁸ See Ang Cheng Guan, *Vietnamese Communists' Relations with China and the Second Indochina Conflict, 1956-1962* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, 1997), 106-108, 120-122, 158-159.



viewed North Vietnam as “the keystone of their national security perimeter in Southeast Asia.”³⁹ After the Sino-US rapprochement, Zhou Enlai, while appearing not unduly worried about the continued existence of SEATO, raised the issue of dissolving SEATO on several occasions.

By the time, everyone was ready to embark on a review, political developments in the United States beginning with the Watergate affair followed by the Vietnamese communist victory in April 1975, brought about a sea change in U.S. strategic outlook with regard to Southeast Asia. The United States, which was central to the alliance, was simply unable to provide the leadership needed to revamp, and change the outlook and purpose of SEATO. The two Southeast Asian countries, Thailand and Philippines, seeing how the wind was changing took the initiative to phase out SEATO. There was also the view shared by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore that SEATO was an obstacle to improving relations with the communist Indochinese countries. The irony was that the Philippines and Thailand, in varying degrees, continued to rely on Washington because they had “no other option.” Malaysia, Australia, and Singapore “were even turning more to the United States after the fall of Indochina. Whatever the impact of the Vietnam War or the dissolution of SEATO on U.S. credibility, Washington remained a central player in the region.⁴⁰ This perhaps explains why even after the demise of SEATO, the Manila Pact was kept alive and left on the backburner. As mentioned above, France, one of

³⁹ Qingfei Yin, “From a Line on Paper to a Line in Physical Reality: Joint State-building at the Chinese-Vietnamese border, 1954-1957,” *Modern Asian Studies* (2020): 41.

⁴⁰ Johannes Kadura, *The War After the War: The Struggle for Credibility during America’s Exit from Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 153.

the least interested members of SEATO, withdrew from the organization but not the Treaty.

With the end of SEATO (the decision to terminate SEATO was made in September 1975 and formally disbanded in 1977), the importance of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations formed in August 1967) took on “new meaning as it gives political cohesiveness to the area and a possible framework for future security cooperation.”⁴¹ The operating word in the quote is the word ‘possible.’ The history of ASEAN and its development must remain the subject of a separate discussion. Suffice to say that ASEAN’s first decade was spent on sorting out its teething problems.⁴² It took nine years before ASEAN held its first summit meeting in Bali in February 1976 marking the start of the “transformation of ASEAN.”⁴³

A New SEATO or an Asian NATO in the Making?

We are now witnessing a reversal of sorts in Sino-U.S. relations, which are on a downhill trajectory that some have described as a new Cold War. There are whisperings that the Quad and Quad Plus may be the early precursor of a new SEATO or an “Asian NATO.” It is far too early

⁴¹ Memorandum from the Representative to the United Nations (Young) to President Carter, Washington, undated, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume III, Foreign Economic Policy*. See also, Shee Poon Kim, “A Decade of ASEAN, 1967-1977,” *Asian Survey* 17, No. 7 (July 1977):753-770.

⁴² See Shee Poon-Kim, “A Decade of ASEAN, 1967-1977,” *Asian Survey* 17, No. 8(1978): 753-770.

⁴³ Barry Desker, “The 1976 Bali Summit: ASEAN Shifts Gears,” in *50 Years of ASEAN and Singapore*, ed. Tommy Koh, Sharon Li-Lian Seah, and Li Lin Chang (Singapore: World Scientific, 2017), 21.



to tell, although the current consensus is that it will not.⁴⁴ Linking the past and the present, it is worth quoting Henry Kissinger,

In Vietnam, no NATO ally supported the United States even politically; they only differed in the degree of their aloofness. South Korea, Thailand, Australia, and the Philippines did extend various kinds of direct and indirect assistance. . . And perhaps some sort of Asian security system might have emerged had America pursued the war to a successful outcome. But after it became apparent that the United States was looking for a way out, SEATO, the potential nucleus of any security alliance, fell apart, and its place was taken by ASEAN—a regional grouping for economic and political cooperation devoid of security functions.

This history needs to be kept in mind by those who argue that America's Asia policy should be designed in direct analogy to the Cold War, with China replacing the Soviet Union as the organizing threat. But, in Asia, the political and strategic conditions simply do not exist for drawing a dividing line and grouping all the nations on one side of it—barring some major Chinese provocation. The attempt to do so—overtly or tacitly—would have quite the opposite effect from what is intended. Friendly countries would, in all probability, choose conspicuous dissociation. They would position themselves somewhere in the

⁴⁴ For discussions on the Quad, see for example, “Could a US-led Quad add up to an Asian Nato against China?” *South China Morning Post*, December 25, 2020; Richard Javad Heydarian, “Benign Neglect: Why Biden Prefers the Quad to ASEAN,” *Asia Times*, June 6, 2021; Huong Le Thu and Sarah Teo, “The Ambitions and Reality of the Quad,” *The Strategist*, June 15, 2021; Amrita Jash, “Thanks to COVID and China, the Quad is a Sealed Deal,” *Pacific Forum*, June 17, 2021.

middle, bringing about the progressive isolation of the United States in the region while inciting Asian nationalism and neutralism.⁴⁵

Historians may never agree whether the United States and SEATO preserved Southeast Asian countries from the Chinese communist threat as President John F. Kennedy claimed in an interview on September 9, 1963.⁴⁶ But an understanding of the history of SEATO, its twists and turns—more than sixty years since its formation and forty-odd years after its demise—has never been more relevant today.

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⁴⁵ Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 115–116.

⁴⁶ According to President Kennedy, “The fact of the matter is that with the assistance of the United States and SEATO, Southeast Asia and indeed all of Asia has been maintained independent against a powerful force, the Chinese Communists.” Quoted in Edwin W. Martin, *Southeast Asia and China: The End of Containment* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977), 1.



Cambodia Conflict, 1979-1991 (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018) and its sequel, *Southeast Asia after the Cold War* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019). He was a Gerald R. Ford Foundation Research Grant Award recipient (Fall 2005), Fulbright Singapore Researcher award recipient (2006-2007), and a Woodrow Wilson Public Policy Scholar (2006-2007). His latest book on the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization was published in 2021. He is currently writing a book on Singapore's Grand Strategy.