

Chapter 6

The Making of “an American Empire” and US Responses to Decolonization in the Early Cold War Years

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Roger Louis, the authoritative historian of British imperial policy, once noted that American anti-colonialism was “always reconciled with the needs of security” or anti-communism.¹ And yet he also stressed that American anti-colonialism “could not be dismissed merely as a self-serving or shallow slogan.” “It was a genuine sentiment,” he added, “amounting to an article of faith on the part of the American people.” He went so far as to assert that it was “a force in itself which helped to shape the substance of defense, economic, and foreign policy” and that it was “a set of principles that most Americans upheld.”²

What can we make of these contradictory statements? Louis’ emphasis on American anti-colonialism as “amounting to an article of faith” among Americans or as “a force itself” that shaped the substance of US Cold War policy needs to be modified. This paper will argue that Louis overemphasizes the importance of anti-colonial sentiment in US

* The paper was submitted on June 15, 2013.

1 William Roger Louis, “American Anti-Colonialism and the Dissolution of the British Empire,” in William Roger Louis and Hedley Bull, *The ‘Special Relationship’: Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 262, 273, 283.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 263–264, 273.

foreign policy, particularly for the policymaking elite. The US attitude toward self-determination, self-government and anti-colonialism was ambiguous and often remained rhetorical. The anti-colonial ideology almost always gave way to US security needs and anti-communism. Therefore, the paper tries to explain the sources of this ambiguity by locating it in the complex interactions of the three major trends in the early Cold War period: colonialism, anti-colonial nationalism and the US logic of the Cold War, in addition to American skepticism of dependent peoples' ability to govern themselves effectively.

Moreover, to better understand the sources of this ambiguity, we also need to place our analysis in the larger context of the US attempt to construct an informal American empire. The US postwar project was to build a liberal-capitalist order that neither conformed to Europe's imperialist/colonial order nor to the socialist order pursued by the Soviet Union.³ US policymakers believed that both European and Soviet-style colonialism were variants of "extreme colonialism." Particularly threatening to the US project was the latter. Mason Sears, a State Department official in the Office of Dependent Area Affairs, observed in August 1953 that the type of "Communist imperialism" seen in Eastern Europe was "colonialism in its most objectionable and repressive form."⁴ Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs Henry A. Byroade agreed. Admitting that Western colonialism was "on its way out," he noted in October 1953 that "a new form of imperialism" or "Soviet colonialism" had begun to "extend a clutching hand to every

3 Since the announcement of Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points in 1918, the US pursued the liberal project. This project was again articulated in the Atlantic Charter of August 1941, declaring that the US would pursue a policy of respecting "the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live" as well as wishing to see sovereign rights and self-government among dependent peoples. The US would also promote "access on equal terms to the trade and to the raw materials of the world." In this paper, the US pursuit of such goals as mentioned above will be called "the liberal project," reflecting the logic and requirements of a "liberal empire."

4 Memorandum by Sears, August 18, 1953 "US Policy on Colonial Issues," *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter cited as *FRUS*), 1952-1954, III (1979), 1162-1163.

quarter of the globe.”⁵ Likewise, Sears commented that they could not support “extreme anti-colonialism” because both “extreme colonialism” and “extreme anti-colonialism” were “made to order for communist exploitation.”⁶

Washington policymakers’ objection to both extremes meant that the US had to take a middle-ground position. This position needed to be examined in terms of the changing status of the US in relation to the Western colonial powers in the perceived bipolar world. In this connection, the suspicion held by British Ambassador to the United States Sir Roger Makins of the US motive in 1954 was revealing. The British ambassador wondered if the Americans were “out to take our place in the Middle East.” Louis, however, calls such a view “problematical.”⁷

This chapter, therefore, further explores this imperial question and suggests that Washington policymakers consciously tried to substitute their influence for those of the other Western colonial powers when they judged that the colonial governments were not doing as good a job as Washington thought they should be doing in maintaining the stability and order required to contain communist threats. Under such a threatening situation, Washington’s view of anti-colonialism served US purposes and interests relatively well by exploiting the ideology as rhetoric to justify taking over responsibility for dependent areas. We should not lose sight of this side of the question. The US support for anti-colonialism and self-determination functioned as a set of ideologies for expanding the predominantly liberal-capitalist domain of the postwar order within the Western bloc.

Various factors influenced US responses to decolonization. The way these factors affected the decolonization process varied depending upon the internal conditions of dependent areas, the international situations that surrounded these areas and on US policymakers’ perceptions of interests and their ideological biases. Therefore, with these factors in mind, the paper examines two historical cases: US responses to decolo-

5 Address made by Byroade, October 31, 1953, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, XI (1983), 55.

6 *FRUS, 1952–1954*, III, 1162.

7 Louis, “American Anti-Colonialism,” pp. 261–262.

nization in Malaya during the Emergency and in the Middle East during the Suez Crisis.

Such an examination will show three things. First, as to the American tradition of “anti-colonialism,” we need to distinguish between policymakers in particular and the American public in general. Second, US policymakers placed more emphasis on the dictates of the Cold War than on self-determination and independence for dependent areas. Third, US government officials were tempted to construct American spheres of influence after the Western colonial powers retreated. Moreover, once the US established her own spheres of influence, she did not hesitate to militarily intervene in the third world to protect her interests.

Section 1 gives a brief overview of various factors which impacted US responses to decolonization in the US postwar liberal project as well as the conflicting interests which made Washington’s attitude toward decolonization ambiguous and often inconsistent. Section 2 examines Washington’s responses to decolonization in Malaya during the Emergency. Section 3 discusses America’s imperial temptation in responding to decolonization in the Middle East during the Suez Crisis. The final section summarizes my arguments by making brief reference to US responses to the First Indochina War.

America’s “Anti-colonialism” and the Requirements of a “Liberal Empire” in the Emerging Cold War

The past literature on the Second World War characterized it mainly as a struggle between the forces of fascism, constituted by the Axis powers, and those of anti-fascism, composed of the Allied powers, neglecting the complex nature of the war. However, it should be noted that it was also a war among imperialist rivals over spheres of influence, as well as a war for national independence.⁸ Particularly noteworthy for the purpose of this chapter was the last feature: wars of independence. Peoples in col-

⁸ Yoichi Kibata, *Dainiji Sekai Taisen [The Second World War]* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 2001), pp. 124–126; Takashi Saito, *Senkanki Kokusaiseiji Shi [A History of International Politics between the Two World Wars]* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1978), pp. 303–308.

onies and dependent areas apparently shared the banner of anti-fascism with the colonial powers. However, their goal of achieving independence was in conflict with the colonial powers’ desire to maintain or regain colonial control.

The United States, which had played a decisive role in leading the Allied powers to victory, soon found herself in conflict with the Soviet Union over postwar settlements. The US and the SU leaders, representing opposing blocs, vied to expand their spheres of influence. Consequently, the postwar years witnessed the development of complicated interactions between the Cold War and decolonization.

Firstly, the US began to approach decolonization with a view to containing the SU and communism. Secondly, a growing number of colonial and recently independent peoples whose primary goal was political and economic autonomy chose to keep their distance from Cold War rivalries. Faced with the bipolar structure of the Cold War, the US found it difficult to turn a deaf ear to the growing desire of colonial peoples for autonomy and independence. US government officials’ fear was that Washington’s neglect for their aspirations would drive them into the opposite camp, consequently bringing a balance of power inimical to US interests.

Given the above situation, the intensification of the Cold War rivalry and the concomitant rise of nationalism among dependent and newly independent peoples posed a serious dilemma for Washington policymakers. The US, with its anti-colonial tradition, tended to be critical of colonialism while sympathetic to the aspirations of colonized peoples. Given the importance that the Western colonial powers held in the US struggle against communism, however, Washington policymakers found it necessary to consider their needs. Faced with the trade-off between the two, Washington policymakers vacillated between colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism, and were often forced to make agonizing choices. As a result, US responses to postwar decolonization, despite the American tradition of “anti-colonialism,” ended up being ambiguous and even merely rhetorical.

Assistant Secretary of State Byroade, who would later serve as Ambassador to Egypt from March 1955 to September 1956, observed in October 1953 that “the movement toward self-determination” was

“one of the most powerful forces” in twentieth century affairs. He also believed that “the new Soviet colonialism,” compared with the disappearing Western colonialism, was “more poisonous” because the former masqueraded under the guise of nationalism or in the name of independence and economic progress. Under such circumstances, the real choice lay “between continued progress toward self-determination and surrender to the new Communist imperialism.”

It must be noted, however, that sovereignty or independence, according to Byroade, should not be given immediately or unconditionally. Not only could premature independence be “dangerous,” but it could also be “retrogressive and destructive.” He believed that these dependent peoples were not mature enough to “maintain order” or “[improve their] social or economic conditions.” The implication was that the granting of premature independence would make these peoples prey to Soviet Communism. In other words, anti-communism took priority over the self-determination or independence of dependent peoples.⁹

Another important consideration was US relations with certain European nations. Particularly important was the economic aspect of the colonial question. Byroade argued that the US could not ignore “the legitimate economic interests” that European nations possessed in dependent areas. A sudden disruption of economic relations “might seriously injure the European economies.” Moreover, it was inseparably related to the question of US security, because the Atlantic defense system depended upon their economic soundness. Certain European allies represented “the major source of free-world defensive power,” and Washington policymakers could not disregard “this side of the colonial question without injury to our own security.”¹⁰

A similar view toward dependent areas was expressed by R. B. Knight, Acting Deputy Director of the Office of Western European Affairs, who wrote a memorandum on Africa. On the one hand, Knight argued that the US should offer strong support for dependent peoples’ aspirations for freedom and self-government. On the other hand, he believed that, in the midst of a power struggle with the USSR, US long-

⁹ Address made by Byroade, October 31, 1953, op. cit.

¹⁰ Ibid.

term interests would lose their meaning unless they were “reconciled with our immediate security interests.” As a result, he reasoned that full cooperation with European colonial powers was “essential to the security of the US and to the success of its policy of containment of the USSR.”¹¹

Byroade’s analysis and observations clearly show that, in the US vision of a postwar international order, national self-determination and independence for dependent peoples had a lower priority than anti-communism, security or US relations with the European colonial powers, as long as the colonial powers were able to govern the dependent areas effectively enough to keep communism from expanding its influence in those areas. When self-determination had a conflict of interest with anti-communism and security issues, the former had to give way to the latter.

The primacy of anti-communism and security in the US Cold War strategy found expression in the question of the former mandated territories of the South Pacific islands under Japanese control. When the administration of these islands was transferred in July 1947 to the US as the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), Washington policymakers took special care to place the areas under exclusive US control by devising a concept of “strategic area.” Thus, the TTPI was designated as a “strategic area” in its 1947 trusteeship agreement.¹² As such, its formal status as a UN trust territory could be terminated only by the Security Council, on which the US could exercise a veto, and not by the General Assembly. As intended, the US Navy was thus able to build military bases for strategic purposes.

The US response to the UN trusteeship system over Micronesia was illustrative of the case in which US military requirements prevailed over the dependent peoples’ desire for self-determination. Professor of History Takashi Saito cogently asserts that the UN trusteeship system

11 Memorandum by R. B. Knight, “U.S. policy towards colonial areas and colonial power,” April 21, 1952, *FRUS 1952–1954*, III, 1103–1104.

12 For a more detailed analysis of arguments within the US government over how the concept of “strategic area” was developed, see William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

was “in practice, a new form of imperialistic division of the colonies by the powers.”¹³ It seems that certain US government officials were aware that this was the case. In February 1955, John F. Dulles, the Eisenhower administration’s secretary of state, sent a letter with the following text to US Ambassador to the UN Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.:

“ . . . if we should endorse a general 20–25 year time-table for the attainment of self-government in Ruanda-Ugandi or Tanganika, the Belgians, British, or any other UN Member would argue cogently that self-government for the widely scattered islands of the Trust Territory should be envisaged in a much shorter time because their peoples are generally more advanced, and have had considerable experience through contacts with the outside world. This could be quite embarrassing for us since we are on record against the establishment of a timetable for the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.”¹⁴

There was a minority view within the State Department which favored the establishment of timetables for self-government or self-determination. For example, Mason Sears, then the assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs, in a memorandum to the deputy under secretary of state of April 1955, felt that the US was too “solicitous” of the views of colonial powers such as Britain, France and Belgium. Sears believed that Washington should make friends with the Africans even at the risk of alienating or irritating European allies. However, a majority of State Department officials, including Dulles, saw such an approach as “too radical,” believing that the US could befriend Africans “without alienating Europeans.”¹⁵

As such, Dulles’ comments indicate that insofar as the UN Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands was concerned, the US was in a position

13 Saito, *Senkanki Kokusaiseiji Shi*, p. 38.

14 Letter, Dulles to Lodge, February 5, 1955, *FRUS, 1955–1957*, XVIII, 2–5.

15 Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs to the Deputy Under Secretary of State, April 20, 1955, *FRUS 1955–1957*, XVIII, pp. 6–7.

not much different from that of the European colonial powers. In this sense, the US also had a colonial profile.¹⁶

US Responses to Decolonization in Malaya and “Anglo-American Cooperation”

In June 1948, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) launched an armed struggle against the British government and the Federation of Malaya, and Malcom MacDonald, the British commissioner-general for the Far East, declared a state of emergency. The local authorities took ruthless measures to suppress the Communist insurrection, causing many casualties on both sides. According to British statistics, the casualties numbered 6,711 men among the guerrillas and 1,865 men among the security forces. The figures excluded additional civilian casualties that brought the total to 3,283 persons.¹⁷ The Malayan Emergency lasted until July 1960.

The US attitude toward decolonization in Malaya until independence in August 1957 was that Malaya was a British responsibility.¹⁸ There were several reasons why Washington regarded the problems of Malaya as British concerns. The Clement Atlee government had granted independence to India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma in 1947–48. However, the Labor government had no intention of extending independence to Malaya in the near future. Malaya was vitally important to the British economy. The rubber estates and tin mines of the Malay Peninsula

16 LaFeber convincingly demonstrates that the US had a history as a colonial power. Walter LaFeber, “The American View of Decolonization, 1776–1920: An Ironic Legacy,” in David Ryan and Victor Pungong, eds., *The United States and Decolonization* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 24–40.

17 Yoichi Kibata, *Teikoku no Tasogare: Reisen ka no Igrisu to Ajia [The Empire in Decline: Britain and Asia in the Cold War Years]* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1996), pp. 135–136.

18 For other works which came to the same conclusion, see A. J. Stockwell, “The United States and Britain’s Decolonization of Malaya, 1942–1957,” in Ryan and Pungong, *The United States and Decolonization*, pp. 188–201. Kibata, *Teikoku no Tasogare*, p. 119.

contributed immensely to Britain's dollar-earning capacity. As such, the Truman administration was informed of the firm intention of the British government to maintain control of the Malay Peninsula. With British troops about to complete their withdrawal from India and Burma, Secretary of State George C. Marshall in mid-May 1947 instructed US Ambassador Lewis W. Douglas in London to send his evaluation of British intentions, capabilities and thinking—in particular, on the UK's defense commitment to the British Empire. The ambassador reported in reply that Malaya was “the one important area in the Far East” which the British evidently had no intention of abandoning. The reasons listed included the strategic importance of Malaya en route to Australasia, its valuable rubber and tin resources, and the political immaturity of its peoples.¹⁹ Moreover, Britain lost India in 1947, the stronghold of the British Empire, so that the political and strategic importance of Malaya and Singapore had increased by the time it faced the Emergency.

What worried Washington more than anything else was the dollar shortage that European allies were facing at that time.²⁰ Compared with exports totaling 16.2 billion dollars, the US imported only 8.7 billion dollars' worth of goods in 1947. With the dollar gap expanding, it was feared that US exports would dry to a trickle. Moreover, Washington policymakers were concerned that the widening dollar gap would threaten postwar European reconstruction. The failure of European reconstruction would in turn increase the chances of communist encroachment on Western Europe.

When the British pound gained convertibility in July 1947, Britain faced a rapid outflow of US dollars. On August 20, London was forced to suspend convertibility. In March 1948, the US Congress passed a foreign assistance bill which included funds for the European Recovery Program (ERP). With \$1.24 billion earmarked for Great Britain out of the ERP, London temporarily weathered the pound crisis. Late in the spring of

19 Douglas to Marshall, June 11, 1947, *FRUS, 1947*, I, 756.

20 For a full discussion of the dollar gap problem, see Hideki Kan, *Beiso Reisen to Amerika no Ajia Seisaku [Soviet-American Confrontation and US Policy toward Asia]* (Kyoto: Minerva Shobo, 1992), pp. 200–214.

1949, however, the US economy went into recession, which resulted in a decrease of exports to the US from the sterling area, while US exports increased. As the result, the dollar-sterling gap widened again from \$330 million at the beginning of 1949 to \$633 million in the second quarter of the same year.²¹

Truman administration officials regarded the logical consequences caused by the dynamics of the capitalist world economy as a serious challenge to the US postwar goal of building a stable liberal world order. The dollar gap problem was perceived as indicating a crisis of the global capitalist system, consisting of Western and Asian allies, with the US at the center. Though the problem itself existed independently of the Soviet threat, the onset of the Cold War created the situation in which the US saw the USSR as the greatest obstacle to its envisioned world order of globalized market forces and liberalism. Another serious obstacle to this postwar order was instability and chaos accompanied by the process of decolonization in the third world.

Under such critical circumstances, Washington policymakers began to see Southeast Asia as part of a larger problem: At stakes was the stability of the capitalist world economy as well as the security of the Western bloc as a whole. Truman administration officials recognized the relationship between British economic difficulties and instability in Southeast Asia. For London to alleviate the dollar-sterling gap, Malaya loomed large. Of all American rubber imports in 1948, 452,647 tons (66.6%) came from Malaya. In 1949, the US imported 477,000 tons of natural rubber, with Malaya accounting for 55% of this and Indonesia accounting for 24%. In 1948, the US received 62% of Malaya’s tin exports and

21 Andrew J. Rotter, “The Big Canvas, 1948–50,” Ph.D. dissertation (Stanford University, 1981), pp. 98–101. Testimony of Richard Bissell, January 12, 1948, U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings: European Recovery Program*, 80th Cong., 2nd session, 1948, pt. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1948), p. 273. Gabriel Kolko and Joyce Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945–1954* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 60–65, 456–459, 462–476.

in 1949 it received 80%.²² In 1948, exports of Malayan rubber and tin earned the sterling area more US dollars than all of Britain's exports combined, and in 1949, sales of rubber alone would surpass all British exports in dollar value.²³

Consequently, by late August 1949, Truman administration officials were convinced that the restoration of triangular trade provided the best hope for alleviating the British economic crisis. The British dollar deficit was partially offset by a British trade surplus with Malaya and a Malayan surplus with the US. Such perceptions among Washington policymakers affected their view of the British response to the communist insurgency in Malaya.

With the Maoist triumph in China in October 1949 and the Korean War in June 1950, the State Department found their "most important collaborators" in the British and their Empire-Commonwealth. NSC 51 of July 1949, formulated by the State Department Policy Planning Staff (PPS), stated as follows: "With China being overwhelmed by Communism, SEA [Southeast Asia] represents a vital segment on the line of containment, stretching from Japan southward around to the Indian Peninsula. The security of the three major non-communist base areas on this quarter of the world—Japan, India, and Australia—depends in large measure on the denial of SEA to the Kremlin."²⁴

Based upon the above analysis, the PPS spelled out the US position on Malaya. "We should support British authority in Malaya," the PPS advised, "until such time as there may occur a basic change in the Malayan situation affecting this policy." Three months later, at a PPS meeting in January 1950, PPS head George F. Kennan remarked that the dissolution of the British Empire was not in the US interest, as "there were many things the Commonwealth could do which we could not do and which we wished them to continue doing." Charles E. Bohlen, US ambassador to France, was attending the meeting. He suggested that the

22 Pamela Sodhy, "Passage of Empire": United States-Malayan Relations to 1966," Ph.D. dissertation (Cornell University, 1992), pp. 122–124.

23 Rotter, "The Big Canvass," p. 109.

24 "Report to the National Security Council by the Secretary of State on US Policy toward Southeast Asia," NSC 51, July 1, 1949.

US and the UK “form a partnership with respect to overseas burdens,” meaning that the British could turn more of their attention to Europe in return for being relieved of some of these burdens.²⁵

Another important factor that influenced Washington’s response to the armed insurgency in Malaya was that it was led by local communists. The British government emphasized that the movement was directed by an outside power and had nothing to do with national aspirations for independence. As a concomitant of the communist triumph in China and the Korean War, the containment not only of Moscow but also of Beijing became the central theme in American relations with Malaya. Ambassador-at-Large Philip C. Jessup was sent on a three-month tour of the Far East. “It is a fundamental decision of American policy,” read his instructions, “that the United States does not intend to permit further extension of Communist domination on the continent of Asia or in the Southeast Asia area.”²⁶ He and his mission spent three days in Malaya, from February 4 to 7, 1950.²⁷ In his final report, Jessup agreed with the State Department’s report to the National Security Council, which held that all measures should be taken to prevent communist expansion in Southeast Asia. He claimed Indochina “the key to the situation,” with Malaya, along with Japan, Korea, the Philippines and Indonesia, “considered to be less critical spots but are not to be neglected.”²⁸

The Jessup mission was followed at the end of February by the Griffin Mission to Asia, which was to study the technical assistance needs of the area. The Griffin Mission, led by R. Allen Griffin, a former deputy director of the Economic Cooperation Administration China program, viewed the Emergency as a grave communist threat, because the pres-

25 Minutes of the 7th Meeting of Policy Planning Staff, January 24, 1950, *FRUS, 1950*, III (1977), 619–622.

26 Evelyn Colbert, *Southeast Asia in International Politics, 1941–1956* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 138.

27 For background information on the Jessup Mission, see Samuel P. Hayes, *The Beginning of American Aid to Southeast Asia: The Griffin Mission of 1950* (Lexington: 1971), pp. 1–6.

28 “Oral report by Ambassador-at-Large, Philip C. Jessup, upon his return from the East,” April 3, 1950, *FRUS, 1950*, VI, 69–76.

ence of effective communist guerrilla forces meant that Malaya was a “particularly inviting target for expanded Communist aggression, either from within or from without.”²⁹ Therefore, the Mission emphasized that “suppression of the Communist campaign of violence is the key to the solution of all other problems.”³⁰

The Griffin Mission recommended that the US should provide a total of \$4.5 million in immediate aid to Malaya. The Truman administration, however, rejected the Mission’s recommendations for Malaya. According to Samuel P. Hays, who served as Griffin’s deputy during the Mission, Washington was reluctant to “undercut British influence in Malaya and Singapore.” In other words, US officials believed that “the British had the primary responsibility for that area.”³¹ The US government, however, was in agreement with the British that the military insurrection in Malaya was led by communist elements and, thus, had to be crushed militarily.

In March 1952, the State Department sent a message to the American consul in Malaya and Singapore as well as to the US embassy in London to the effect that “the present struggle in Malaya” was conducted “as an integral part of the free world’s common effort to halt Communist aggression” and therefore that “British endeavours to defeat insurgents” should be supported.³² The NSC report also declared that US policy was “to support the British in their measures to eradicate communist guerrilla forces and restore order.”³³ Communist influence in movements for self-government or independence was a crucial factor in the US response to decolonization in Asia.

Compare the case of Indonesia’s anti-colonial movement, for example. This is the case in which Washington responded differently from the communist-led insurgency in Malaya as the Indonesian movement was

29 Hayes, *The Beginning of American Aid*, p. 129.

30 Ibid., p. 127.

31 Ibid., pp. 28–31.

32 DOS to American Consul, Malaya and Singapore and US Embassy, London, March 4, 1952, RG 57, 297-0013-451, quoted in Stockwell, “The United States and Britain’s Decolonization,” p. 199.

33 NSC 5405, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, XII, pt. 1, 366.

led not by communists but by the nationalists. Between the Dutch reoccupation of the Netherlands Indies in 1945 and the successful suppression in 1948 of the abortive communist revolt in eastern Java against the Mohammed Hatta government, the attitude of Washington policymakers remained that of studied non-involvement in developments in Indonesia. They did not question Dutch sovereignty over the East Indies. Initially, the Truman administration not only refused to recognize the Republic of Indonesia as an equal party to the dispute but also extended lend-lease and surplus-property credits in excess of \$100 million as well as subsequent Marshall Plan aid to the Dutch.³⁴

However, several factors combined to make a radical shift in Washington’s policy toward the Dutch-Indonesian clash. First, after the Truman Doctrine was announced in early 1947, the American response was increasingly shaped in a larger context of worldwide struggle against an international Communist movement directed by Moscow. Second, the success of the Marshall Plan for European recovery became the central focus of American policymakers in mid-1948. During the Marshall Plan hearings, Acheson stressed that, if the European Recovery Program (ERP) were to succeed, the Western European countries would have to increase their exports substantially. He understood that most of the exports would “go to Southeast Asia.” Richard M. Bissell, secretary to the Subcommittee on Economic and Financial Analysis for the President’s Commission on Foreign Aid, also testified that the Dutch, British and French possessions in Southeast Asia were “extremely important” to the success of the Marshall Plan because “they have historically been earners of dollars for the home countries.” He emphasized that this was particularly true of the Dutch East Indies and British Malaya.³⁵

34 Robert J. McMahon, *Colonialism and Cold War: The United States and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence, 1945–1949* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 139. As for the Marshall Plan aid, the US government was allocating \$506 million to the Netherlands in early 1948, with the stipulation that \$84 million was to be used for reconstruction of the Netherlands Indies, which favored the Hague. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

35 Testimony of Dean Acheson, January 29, 1948, in US Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Hearings: U.S. Foreign Policy for a Post-War*

Third and most importantly of all, the armed revolt of September 1948 was quickly crushed by the Hatta government, which demonstrated that Hatta and Sukarno were in firm control of the nationalist movement. Robert A. Lovett, under secretary of state, noted that the Republic of Indonesia was “the only government in the Far East to have met and crushed an all-out Communist offensive.”³⁶ When the Netherlands government continued to resort to arms, ignoring the UN Security Council cease-fire resolutions, the US government warned the Dutch that, unless they immediately entered meaningful negotiations with the Indonesian government, all economic assistance would be withdrawn from The Hague. Then, in January 1949, Lovett told the ambassador of the Netherlands that the Indonesian problem had blown up, as a result of Dutch military action, to the point where it was extremely difficult. Public and Congressional opinion, he warned, might jeopardize EAC aid to Holland and the North Atlantic Security Pact, which suggested that naming a date for the transfer of sovereignty might be the answer.³⁷ The Dutch understood the seriousness of the warning, which finally led to Indonesia’s independence in December 1949.

In the meantime, US responses to the Emergency in Malaya continued to be defined by the same issues until the country gained independence in 1957: the containment of Communism, Britain’s primary responsibility for Malaya, “Anglo-American cooperation” and the importance of the Malayan link in reconstructing Western Europe for the stability of the capitalist world economy. A memorandum by Major General H. J. Malony, the Department of Defense member on the Southeast Asia Aid Committee, noted that “Malaya is significant in this area because

Recovery Program, 80th Cong. 2nd session, 1948, pt. 1, p. 739; Testimony of Richard M. Bissell, January 12, 1948, in U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings: European Recovery Program*, 80th Congress, 2nd session, 1948, pt. 1, p. 273.

³⁶ Lovett to Certain Diplomatic and Consular Officers Abroad, December 31, 1948, *FRUS*, 1948, VI, 618–620.

³⁷ Memorandum of conversation with the Ambassador of Netherlands by the Acting Secretary of State (Lovett), January 11, 1949, *FRUS*, 1949, VII, pt. 1, 139–141.

it is a large source of dollar earnings for the United Kingdom.” These earnings, in turn, impacted “British capabilities within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.”³⁸ The Central Intelligence Agency in November 1951 also reiterated the importance of Malaya’s European connection. “The loss of Malaya’s dollar earnings,” noted a CIA document, “would be a severe blow to the UK and indirectly to the US.” It further stated, “the consequent maladjustment would be created in the strategic material and in the balance of payments position of the NATO countries, and could result in a serious setback in the role of NATO rearmament.”³⁹ Subsequently, however, with NATO countries’ economies on their way to recovery and stability in the mid-1950s and beyond, Washington policymakers’ consideration of this factor decreased in importance.

Anglo-American cooperation in the decolonization process in Malaya continued for as long as the British handling of the communist insurgency contributed to the ever-growing importance of the US policy of containing communism in Southeast Asia. Moreover, when President Eisenhower moved into the White House, the US view that the problems of Malaya were a British responsibility remained basically unchanged. The drafters of an NSC Progress Report thought in July 1956, for example, that the US could do better than the British to counter Communist subversion by a comprehensive plan of action, but at the same time they admitted that “U.S. ability to influence events in these areas is . . . severely limited by the primacy of British influence and responsibility.”⁴⁰

America’s Imperial Temptation and US Responses to Decolonization during the Suez Crisis

US responses to decolonization in the Middle East during the Suez Crisis were determined by such factors as Cold War imperatives, Arab

38 H. J. Malony, “US Position with Respect to Thailand, Burma, and Malaya,” October 31, 1950, *FRUS, 1950*, VI, 154.

39 Memorandum by the CIA, November 13, 1951, *FRUS, 1951*, VI, 112.

40 NSC Progress Report on “US Objectives and Course of Action with Respect to Southeast Asia,” July 11, 1956, NSC Series, Eisenhower Library, quoted in Sodhy, “Passage of Empire,” p. 290.

nationalism, strategic importance (e.g., oil concessions in the area), the Arab-Israeli dispute and US sympathy for anti-colonialism.

Ernest Bevin, foreign minister of the Labor government which had succeeded Winston Churchill, declared in the Lower House in January 1948 that the Middle East constituted a vital element for world peace and the lifeline for the British Commonwealth.⁴¹ Truman administration officials fully recognized the strategic importance of the Middle East to the British Empire, viewing the defense of Israel and the Middle East as a British responsibility. A memorandum prepared in the State Department mentioned that “the security of the Eastern Mediterranean and of the Middle East is vital to the security of the United States.” However, as another memorandum indicated, the British should continue to “maintain primary responsibility for the defense of the area.”⁴² Kennan’s memorandum reviewing the current trends in early 1948 also agreed that Washington should make every possible effort to support the UK’s position in the Middle East. The Policy Planning Staff head added that “any policy on our part which tends to strain British relations with the Arab world and to whittle down the British position in the Arab countries” was “against the immediate strategic interests of our country.”⁴³

Washington’s view of the British role in the area remained unchanged throughout the months of 1949. After the start of the Korean War in June 1950, such a view was even strengthened, though it did not last long. “Because of US commitments in other areas,” a NSC document stated, “it is in the US interest that the United Kingdom has [sic] primary military responsibility for Israel and the Arab states.” Another policy statement prepared in the Office of Near Eastern Affairs, therefore, emphasized “close US-UK cooperation wherever possible,” proposing

41 Yuta Sasaki, *Igirisu Teikoku to Suez Senso [The British Empire and the Suez Crisis]* (Nagoya: Nagoya University Press, 1997), p. 40.

42 Memorandum prepared in the State Department, “The American Paper” (undated), *FRUS*, 1947, V, 575; Memorandum by the Chief of the Division of South Asian Affairs (Hare), November 5, 1947, *ibid.*, 579.

43 Kennan memorandum, PPS 23 “Review of Current Trends: US Foreign Policy,” February 24, 1948, *FRUS*, 1948, V, pt. 2, 656.

to “refrain from action which might tend to undermine the position of the United Kingdom in the Near East.”⁴⁴

At the same time, it should be noted that the security of the region, as well as its political and economic stability, was also “vital to the security of the United States.”⁴⁵ Moreover, even though the region’s primary responsibility lay in the hands of Great Britain, it did not necessarily follow that the US “should become a sort of Middle Eastern junior partner of the British.”⁴⁶ As long as Arab states seemed oriented toward the West and generally successful in suppressing existing communist activities, Washington policymakers had no reason not to entrust the British with the task of managing whatever problems existed in the region. Such was the situation before the Korean War.

However, after the Korean War, Washington policymakers began to see Arab states and Israel as feeling more vulnerable vis-à-vis the USSR.⁴⁷ With Arab nationalism reaching its zenith toward the mid-1950s and intensifying tensions between colonialism and anti-colonialism, Washington policymakers began to worry about the decline of British influence in the Middle East, shaking the foundation of Anglo-American cooperation in the region.

Early signs of Washington’s concerns about the British ability to deal effectively with Arab nationalism appeared during policy deliberations among the highest-ranking members of the Truman administration in the closing month of 1951. According to Washington policymakers, the major threats to Western interests in the Middle East lay in several mutually related factors: “the growing instability within the Middle East states,” the tensions and hostile attitudes between the Arab states and Israel, the deteriorating relationships between Arab states and Western

44 NSC 47/5, “Statement of Policy Proposed by the NSC,” March 14, 1951, *FRUS, 1951*, V, 96; Policy statement prepared in the Office of Near Eastern Affairs, December 28, 1950, “Regional Policy Statement: Near East,” *FRUS, 1950*, V, 278.

45 *FRUS, 1947*, V, 575, 579; *FRUS, 1949*, VI, 1430–1440.

46 *FRUS, 1947*, V, 579.

47 Staff Study by NSC, “US Policy Toward the Arab States and Israel,” March 14, 1951, *FRUS, 1951*, V, 98.

powers, notably the United Kingdom, and “the prevailing attitude of neutralism.” “In the past,” an NSC study observed, “the United States has relied primarily on the United Kingdom for the maintenance and defense of Western interests in the Middle East.” However, “the rapidly declining ability of the United Kingdom to maintain and defend Western interests” in parts of the region “creates the need for a review and restatement of US policy toward the Middle East.”⁴⁸

The greatest concern of Washington was that, with approximately half of the world’s known oil reserves in the Middle East, access to these rich reserves was “of great importance to the Free World.” Consequently, it was in the US interest “to take whatever appropriate measures it can” to maintain and defend these interests. In other words, the extension of Soviet control over the region, it was feared, would “mean a violent shift in the world balance of power.” Under such circumstances, the NSC study concluded that the West clearly “must work toward the establishment of a new basis and a new kind of relationship with the Middle East states.” In other words, it seemed doubtful that the US or the UK, or even both together, could maintain and defend Western interests in the area “in the 19th century fashion.”⁴⁹

These views were incorporated into the NSC study dated April 24, 1952. What is particularly noteworthy in this study was Washington’s view of the situation in the Middle East. The danger in this area to the security of the Free World was seen as arising “not so much from the threat of direct Soviet military attack as from acute instability, anti-Western nationalism and Arab-Israeli antagonism.” To tackle these sources of instability and disorder in the region, US policymakers believed that Washington “should take an increased share of responsibility toward the area.” They thought, however, that at this point, they should do so “in concert with the United Kingdom.”⁵⁰ The implication was that so

48 Draft Study by NSC, “Position of the United States with Respect to the General Area of the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East,” December 27, 1951, *FRUS, 1951*, V, 258–259.

49 *Ibid.*, 258–259.

50 NSC 129/1 “US Objectives and Policies with Respect to the Arab States and Israel,” April 24, 1952, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, IX, 223–224.

long as the UK performed well in ensuring the security and stability of the region, it was desirable for the US to continue cooperating with the British. Otherwise, however, the US might have to take over the responsibility from the British.

US imperial temptation began to show itself during negotiations on a base agreement between Britain and Egypt from 1953 through July 1954. The US government tried to maintain a balance between Arab nationalism and Anglo-American cooperation throughout the bilateral negotiations. On the one hand, Washington policymakers continued to take the position that the stability and defense of the Middle East was a British responsibility. On the other, they thought that the issue of withdrawing British troops from the Suez Canal area should be worked out between the two parties concerned.⁵¹ Unsatisfied with Washington’s attitude, Prime Minister Churchill sent a personal letter to President Eisenhower in March 1953. “I am very sorry,” he lamented, “that you do not feel that you can do much to help us about the Canal Zone.” Churchill could only hope that “it will not look as if the United States is taking sides against us.”⁵²

Washington’s need for a balancing act as well as initially studied non-involvement in the Suez base agreement negotiations was influenced by the extraordinarily harsh views entertained by Egyptian leaders toward the British presence. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Mutual Security Administration Director Harold Stassen visited the Near and Middle East from May 9 through 29, 1953. On May 11 and 12, they met the Egyptian leaders. Prime Minister Naguib told the US participants at the meeting that the main obstacles for improving relations between Egypt and the US were the US’s pro-Israel policy in the Arab-Israeli dispute and her support for the UK in the Middle East. At the meeting on the second day, Abdel Gamal Nasser made it crystal-clear that the Egyptian people thought of the Middle Eastern Defense Organization (MEDO) as a “perpetuation of occupation” and that “British influence

51 *FRUS, 1952–1954*, IX, pt. 2, 1997–2000, 2022–2023, 2024–2025, 2042–2043.

52 Prime Minister Churchill to President Eisenhower, personal correspondence, March 18, 1953, *ibid.*, 2026–2027.

must entirely disappear.” Dulles came away from these meetings feeling that the situation in Egypt was “more serious than” the Department of State had recognized. He even felt that “[the] possibility of open hostilities in [the] near future is real.” Based on the observations from these meetings, Dulles reported at the NSC meeting in June that the present concept of a MEDO, with Egypt as the key, had to be abandoned. The NSC meeting concluded that the US “should concentrate now on building a defense in the area based on the northern tier,” including Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey.⁵³

As a result, the Eisenhower government distanced itself from London’s initiative to reorganize the abortive Middle Eastern Command into a Middle Eastern Defense Organization which Nasser saw as the UK’s attempt to justify the continued stationing of its troops in the Suez. In a similar vein, the US government informed the British government that Washington would not join the Baghdad Pact because tackling the Arab-Israeli problem was considered more pressing from Washington’s point of view. Moreover, Nasser violently opposed the pact because he not only suspected the nature of the pact’s underlying purpose but also saw Israel as posing a more immediate threat to Egypt’s security.⁵⁴

In the meantime, in Egypt, the “Free Officers” including Nasser, with the help of new recruits from the army, had overthrown King Farouk in July 1952 and established the Revolutionary Command Council. Major General Muhammad Naguib became prime minister of the new government, while Nasser called the shots in the background. What should be noted in this connection was the role of operatives in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), such as Kermit Roosevelt, the

53 Memorandum of conversation, May 11, 1953, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, IX, 10; Memorandum of conversation, May 12, 1953, *ibid.*, 21; The Ambassador in Egypt (Caffery) to the Department of State, May 13, 1953, *ibid.*, 25; Memorandum of discussion at the 147th Meeting of the NSC, June 1, 1953, *ibid.*, 381–386.

54 Donald Neff, *Warriors at Suez: Eisenhower Takes America into the Middle East* (New York: The Linden Press/Simon & Schuster, 1981), pp. 75–76. Sasaki, *Igirisu Teikoku to Suez Senso*, pp. 117–126.

CIA’s specialist on the Middle East, and Miles Coperland, Roosevelt’s undercover agent in Cairo. By late 1951, CIA officials had been conferring regularly with intermediaries of the “Free Officers” as they discussed plans for the overthrow of King Farouk. Because of Roosevelt’s “extremely close ties” with Nasser, the Egyptian leader was considered “an agency asset.”⁵⁵ Such being the case, the US not only had advance knowledge of the July coup but also actively encouraged the action. Even after Nasser’s defiance in September 1955 of Washington’s pressure to scotch the arms deal with the Soviet bloc, covert links with the CIA were maintained. After the Egyptian arms deal, CIA Director Allen Dulles instructed the Cairo station that “Nasser remains our best hope” and that “we believe State Department will within limits of overall policy cooperate to mitigate long-term efforts of arms deal if Nasser in turn cooperates.”⁵⁶ A policy of leaving the door open to Nasser to return to good relations if he so desired can be read as a precautionary measure by Washington against the possibility that the UK might be pushed out of Egypt in the future.

In contrast, the coup caught the British by surprise. They had been aware of the close relationship between the CIA and Nasser. Not only did they resent it, but they also suspected Washington’s motives in maintaining such close ties. Evelyn Shuckburgh, British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden’s closest assistant from 1951 to 1956 and under-secretary in charge of Middle Eastern affairs of the British Foreign Office from 1954 to 1956, wrote in his diary entry of December 2, 1952: “Slept badly and became very depressed about the world in general. Our economic situation, German and Japanese competition, destruction of British influence in the Mediterranean and Middle East . . . The Americans not backing us anywhere. In fact, having destroyed the Dutch empire, the United States are now engaged in undermining the French and British empires as hard as they can.” On May 2, 1954, Eden snapped to Shuckburgh that “[A]ll the Americans want to do is to replace the French and run Indo-

55 Neff, *Warriors at Suez*, p. 177.

56 Scott Lucas, “The Limits of Ideology: United States Foreign Policy and Arab Nationalism,” in Ryan and Pungong, *The United States and Decolonization*, pp. 146, 150.

China themselves. They want to replace us in Egypt too. They want to run the world.”⁵⁷

Here is the situation in which Great Britain found it increasingly difficult to maintain its position in the Middle East. Washington policymakers were worried that a power vacuum would emerge with the declining power of the British Empire. In other words, they found that they were increasingly placed in a situation where the Cold War logic left no choice but for the US to take over responsibility for the area so that Moscow could not move into a possible power vacuum. On the other hand, the British government was greatly concerned that, should Britain be pushed out of the Suez Canal area, she would lose influence not only in the Middle East but also in what had been her traditional spheres of influence in other parts of the world. However, the Eisenhower administration was prepared to bear the costs that a hegemonic power had to shoulder to contain Communist expansion in the Middle East.

While negotiations over a Suez base agreement were under way between the Naguib government and London, meetings of the Foreign Ministers of the US and the UK were held at the Department of State in July 1953. Lord Salisbury attended these meetings on behalf of Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. Dulles told the British participants that a MEDO-type defense arrangement was unrealistic, as Lebanon and Syria were not preoccupied with the Soviet threat, and that an arrangement based on the northern tier of countries was preferable. Dulles also wondered if the UK had “reverted to the old type hardboiled approach formerly employed in dealing with Arab states,” making it clear that such a policy would not succeed. Lord Salisbury replied that such criticism was “not in accord with the facts,” citing the British postwar record of dealing with its colonial possessions such as India, Pakistan, Ceylon and the African colonies.⁵⁸ From these exchanges of opinion, Lord Salisbury had

57 Evelyn Shuckburgh, *Descent to Suez: Diaries 1951–1956* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), pp. 63, 187.

58 First Meetings of the Foreign Ministers of the US and the UK, July 11, 1953, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, V, pt. 2, 1638; Second Meeting, July 14, 1953, *ibid.*, 1680–1681.

the impression that the US government not only saw the British position on the base negotiations as “reactionary” but also tried to maintain some distance and mediate in the bilateral negotiations.

Also surprising to London was the fact that the US government, without consulting the British, was directly communicating with Naguib and actually acting as mediator between the UK and Egypt. At the above-mentioned meetings of foreign ministers, Dulles showed Salisbury the Egyptian prime minister’s letter to President Eisenhower which attached the Egyptian formula concerning the Suez Canal base negotiations. Naguib’s letter stated that conclusion of an agreement concerning the Suez Canal base was conditional on “the immediate evacuation of all British personnel in the Canal Zone.” In addition, the Egyptian formula referred to Egypt’s plan to consult not only with the UK but also with the US regarding measures to “strengthen Egypt militarily and economically.”⁵⁹ The British government saw Washington’s moves as a very dangerous first step on the part of the US to secure a foothold in the Middle East by acting as a mediator for Anglo-Egyptian negotiations on a base agreement.

Nevertheless, London found it desirable to have some kind of agreement rather than risk losing everything with no agreement. Finally, in July 1954, both the UK and Egypt signed a base agreement which allowed Britain the right to reintroduce her troops in time of war, while the British government pledged to withdraw all the troops from the Suez Canal base by June 1956.

Washington had its own reasons for not getting too involved in Anglo-Egyptian base negotiations. During his visit to Egypt in May 1953, Dulles was quite impressed by the intensity of enmity and distrust toward the British among the Egyptian leaders. Naguib told the secretary that originally the Arab peoples felt bitterness only against the UK. However, they “now feel that the UK has shifted some of the burden of

59 For the documents, see Egyptian Prime Minister Naguib to President Eisenhower, July 10, 1953; Egyptian Formula concerning the Suez Canal Base. The UK and US Foreign Ministers discussed the formula at their meetings on July 11 and 14, *ibid.*, 1696–1699.

bitterness on the shoulders of the US.”⁶⁰ Accordingly, Dulles reported at the NSC meeting of June 1953 that “the prestige of the Western powers in the Middle East was in general very low” and that the US “suffered from being linked with British and French imperialism.” The Secretary also explained at the same NSC meeting that, in their meetings with the Egyptian leaders, Dulles and Stassen “had done everything they could to allay hostility” to the US.⁶¹ In fact, Dulles told the Egyptians that “British troops should evacuate and Egyptian sovereignty should be fully restored.” Therefore, Dulles told the NSC members that, in his opinion, the US had “no desire to back the UK in ‘imperialism’ or ‘colonialism’.”⁶²

Anglo-Egyptian relations continued to deteriorate. The sudden raid on Gaza by Israeli troops on February 28, 1955 had forced Nasser to radically change his policy priority from economic development to rearmament and defense. Nasser now placed the highest priority on obtaining arms. Despite his repeated requests for arms from Washington, however, the Eisenhower administration refused to respond, and Britain and France followed suit. Their non-cooperation on supplies of arms led Nasser to turn to Moscow, and the Egyptian leader announced an arms deal with Czechoslovakia in September 1955. Suddenly taken aback, both Washington and London offered to finance the Aswan Dam project. In December 1955, Washington, London and Cairo came to an agreement to finance the project. The Anglo-American intention of this aid was to prevent Nasser from moving more favorably toward Moscow. However, unable to change Nasser’s mind, the US government abruptly told Cairo in July 1956 that Washington would withdraw the offer. In retaliation, Nasser announced on July 26 that he had signed the decree nationalizing the Suez Canal Company.

Washington and London responded differently to the Suez Crisis. On July 27, 1956, the British cabinet made the decision to take military

60 Memorandum of conversation, prepared in the Embassy in Cairo, Subject “Egypt,” May 11, 1953, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, IX, pt. 1, 10.

61 Memorandum of discussion at the 147th meeting of the NSC, June 1, 1953, *ibid.*, 383.

62 Memorandum of conversation, prepared in the Embassy in Cairo, Subject “Egypt,” May 11, 1953, *ibid.*, 20.

action even if they had to do it alone. They so informed Washington. However, Eisenhower administration officials were against the use of force. On August 1, 1956, Dulles told Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd that “a way must be found to make Nasser disgorge.”⁶³

However, Dulles also told Lloyd that “force is the last method to be tried.” He said he would not “exclude it [force] if all other means fail.” In other words, “if it is used,” Dulles explained, “it must be backed by world opinion.” “Without adequate preparation of public opinion,” the US could not associate herself in a military undertaking. More specifically, Dulles pointed out that US Congress and public opinion were not yet prepared for it. The next day, he met French Foreign Minister Christian Pineau and reiterated the importance of mobilizing world opinion and “in particular US opinion” before any strong action was taken.⁶⁴

Dulles thought that Nasser could be brought to “disgorge by means other than military.” What he meant by this was to have a conference of interested parties concerning international control of the canal. If Nasser refused to accept an arrangement for international control recommended by conference, “world opinion, and in particular US opinion, would be clarified.” It would then “become possible to consider stronger action if it should appear necessary.”⁶⁵ At a White House inner conference on July 31, Dulles again remarked that “if a proposal of this kind were made to the Arabs with world backing,” “it would be possible to take armed

63 Memorandum of a conversation, British Foreign Office, London, August 1, 1956, *FRUS, 1955–1957*, XVI, 95.

64 *Ibid.* For Dulles-Pineau conversation, *ibid.*, 101.

65 Telegram from the Embassy in the UK to DOS, London, August 2, 1956, *ibid.*, 101. See also, memorandum of a conversation between PM Eden and SOS Dulles, London, August 1, 1956, *ibid.*, 98–99. The transcript of the British Foreign Office on this point gives the reader the impression that Dulles was more permissive about resorting to force. Dulles thought if “it should be possible to create a world public opinion so adverse to Nasser that he would be isolated,” then “if a military operation had to be undertaken, it would be more apt to succeed and have less grave repercussions than if it had been undertaken precipitately.” *Ibid.*, note 2, 95–96.

action if it becomes necessary with a good chance of retaining a large measure of support.”⁶⁶

The Suez Canal Conference, known as the 22-Power London Conference, met in London from August 16 to 23. On August 23, the establishment of the Five-Nation Committee, also known as the Suez Committee, was announced. The Suez Committee was entrusted with the task of operating, maintaining, developing and enlarging the canal, but this Eighteen-Power Proposal would be rejected by Nasser on September 9. However, what Dulles had in mind was exactly this kind of conference, a genuine effort to mobilize not only world opinion but also US opinion before any resort to force.

Dulles stressed the need for genuine efforts by London and Paris to mobilize world opinion for the following reasons. First of all, the US government felt it necessary to maintain a balance between colonialism and Arab nationalism. The balancing act required Washington to behave cautiously, because peoples in the Middle East were suspicious of US relationships with the other colonial powers. In the Cold War rivalry, the US could not risk driving non-communist Arab countries into the Soviet bloc. Rather, the US should seek to guide the nationalist pressures throughout the area into channels not antagonistic to the West. Thus Eisenhower told Churchill in July 1954 that “should we try to dam [nationalism] up completely, it would like a mighty river, burst through the barriers and could create a havoc.” Therefore, the president advised the prime minister that the West should “make constructive use of this force” so that the result could “redound greatly to our advantage, particularly in our support against the Kremlin’s power.”⁶⁷

At an NSC meeting in November 1, 1956, Dulles offered the following observation. “For many years now,” the secretary said, “the United States has been walking a tight rope between the effort to maintain our old and valued relations with our British and French allies on the

66 Memorandum of a conference with the president, White House, July 1, 1956, *FRUS, 1955–1957*, XVI, 63.

67 Eisenhower to Churchill, July 22, 1954, Ann Whitman Series, David D. Eisenhower Diaries, Box 4, DDE Personal Diary, January–November 1954, quoted in Lucas, “The Limits of Ideology,” p. 147.

one hand, and on the other trying to assure ourselves of the friendship and understanding of the newly independent countries who [sic] have escaped from colonialism.” However, the US “could not walk this tight rope much longer.” “Unless we now assert and maintain this leadership”, he continued, “all of these newly independent countries will turn from us to the USSR.” If they supported the French and the British on the colonial issue, the US “will share the fate of Britain and France.” President Eisenhower agreed that “in doing so,” the US would “lose the whole Arab world.”⁶⁸

Given their view of the world situation and the consequences that military measures were likely to bring about, it was clear which course the US should follow.

Beginning with Israel’s invasion of Egypt on October 29, 1956, the Suez War broke out, and two days later, British and French forces bombarded Egyptian airfields in the vicinity of the Suez Canal Zone. The Eisenhower administration responded by pressuring London and Paris to accept the UN resolution calling for a ceasefire with the withdrawal of forces and the acceptance of a UN police force. Washington’s decision to suspend oil supplies, as well as its refusal to support an impending collapse of the pound sterling, was decisive in finally forcing Britain and France to withdraw their troops from Egypt on December 21, 1956.⁶⁹

The crucial difference between Washington and London/Paris was that, for the latter, the stakes were too high to let Nasser get away with nationalizing the Suez Canal. Chancellor of the Exchequer Harold Macmillan explained the position taken by the British Cabinet, telling Dulles in August 1956 that “if this action were not met by the utmost firmness a chain reaction would be started which would ultimately lead to the loss of the entire British influence in the Middle East.”⁷⁰ French Foreign

68 Memorandum of discussion at the 302d meeting of NSC, November 1, 1956, *ibid.*, 906, 910.

69 Diane B. Kunz, *Butter and Guns: America’s Cold War Economic Diplomacy* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), pp. 84–87.

70 Memorandum of a conversation, London, August 1, 1956, *FRUS, 1955–1957*, XVI, 108.

Minister Pineau shared his view with the British, stressing the vital interests involved in the dispute. At a tripartite meeting among the Foreign Ministers in early October, when Dulles told Lloyd and Pineau that the US was against resorting to force, the French Foreign Minister retorted, “we don’t think the US Government realizes the importance that France and the UK attach to Suez. It is not merely the Canal, but is the Middle East, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia that are involved.”⁷¹

Both Eisenhower and Dulles were aware that London and Paris were playing for extremely high stakes. Dulles showed his sympathy with and understanding of their position on several occasions. He remarked to the president in August 2, 1956, as follows: “I am not sure from their standpoint they can be blamed as they feel, probably with reason, that if Nasser gets away with his action, this will stimulate comparable action throughout the area which will end British and French positions in Middle East and North Africa, respectively.”⁷² Notwithstanding his objection to use of force under the circumstances, Eisenhower himself asked rhetorically at an NSC meeting on August 9, 1956, “how Europe could be expected to remain at the mercy of the whim of a dictator.” He thought that Nasser “had gone too far.”⁷³ Such sympathy and understanding of their positions led Dulles to remark to Selwyn Lloyd and Christian Pineau, the British and French foreign ministers, in October 1956 that “the US would not want to say that circumstances might not arise where the only alternative would be the use of force. Sometimes one must use it without prospect of a satisfactory outcome.”⁷⁴

When the die was cast, however, the US government worked against the Anglo-French decision for military action, because it was feared that such measures would lose the sympathy of peoples not only in the Middle East but also in other parts of the world, eventually driving them to the Soviet Union. The Cold War logic prevailed. As Dulles said at an

71 Memorandum of a conversation, New York, October 5, 1956, *ibid.*, 641.

72 Message from Dulles to the President, London, August 2, 1956, *ibid.*, 110. See also, Dulles’ July 31 remark, *ibid.*, 64.

73 Memorandum of discussion at the 292nd meeting of the NSC, August 9, 1956, *ibid.*, 174.

74 *Ibid.*, 642.

NSC meeting in November 1956, “it is not less than tragic that at this very time, when we are on the point of winning an immense and long-hoped-for victory over Soviet colonialism in Eastern Europe, we should be forced to choose between following in the footsteps of Anglo-French colonialism in Asia and Africa, or splitting our course away from their course.” From Washington’s standpoint, “what the British and French had done was nothing but the straight old-fashioned variety of colonialism of the most obvious sort.”⁷⁵

The Suez Crisis became a turning point in the Middle East from which the US emerged as the most influential player, with the UK and France as junior partners. The announcement of the Eisenhower Doctrine in March 1957 was an expression of US determination to take responsibility for the region as a hegemonic power. The president was authorized by Congress to use force whenever he thought it necessary, in order to prevent “international communism” from conquering the Middle East.

It did not mean, however, that US policy in the region was consistent with the principle of anti-colonialism. The US priority on the containment of the Soviet Union remained unchanged, thereby making stability and order in the newly independent countries more important than faithfully following the principles of self-determination and sovereignty. The US government also continued to foster and sustain pro-American regimes, or at least it tried to accommodate nationalist regimes not antagonistic to US interests in the area.

Once the US replaced the colonial powers in the region, its foreign policy dilemma there became apparent. Egypt and Syria formed the United Arab Republic in early 1958. By early June, internal strife had escalated into a civil war in Lebanon, where rebel forces were supported by Syria under Nasser’s influence. Moreover, on July 14, 1958, the pro-Western Iraqi kingdom fell to nationalist army officers who admired Nasser. Eisenhower was afraid that Lebanon would be next. So on the day of the Baghdad coup, Eisenhower ordered US troops to land in Lebanon, followed by the UK’s deployment of troops to Jordan.

An intriguing conversation took place at this point between Dulles and Eisenhower. The president said at a conference on July 14 that “to

75 NSC 302 Meeting, November 1, 1956, *ibid.*, 909.

lose this area by inaction would be far worse than the loss of China, because of the strategic position and resources of the Middle East.” He also remarked that “the most strategic move would be to attack Cairo in the present circumstances, but of course this cannot be done.” Dulles agreed. “Many will say,” the secretary said, “we are simply doing what we stopped the British and the French from doing at the time of the Suez crisis.”⁷⁶

As Dulles admitted, the rationale and logic behind their decision to send troops to Lebanon were not so different from those that the UK and France had relied upon during the Suez Crisis. The US, as the protector of the region against communism, saw no choice but to demonstrate its military power to buttress faltering non-communist regimes in the area.

By Way of Conclusion

A more or less similar pattern of behavior and thinking can be observed in the case of US responses to the First Indochina War. US governments under Truman and Eisenhower regarded Indochina as a French responsibility. Both administrations viewed France’s colonial outlook and methods as “dangerously outmoded.” At the same time, however, US policymakers were aware of Ho Chi Minh’s Communist connections. Their concern over Ho’s Moscow and Beijing connections grew as the Cold War rivalry intensified. Truman made the decision to provide military assistance to France in the fight against Vietminh forces. Behind this decision was the administration’s view, expressed by Acheson, that “[the] question [of] whether Ho [is] as much nationalist as Commie is irrelevant. All Stalinists in colonial areas are nationalists. With achievement [of] national aims (i.e., independence) their objective necessarily becomes subordination [of] state to Commie purposes and ruthless extermination not only [of] opposition but [of] all elements suspected [of] even [the] slightest deviation . . .”⁷⁷ NSC 64 of February 1950 thus

⁷⁶ Memorandum of a conference with the President, July 14, 1958, *FRUS, 1958–1960*, XI, 213–215.

⁷⁷ William A. Williams et al., eds., *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History* (New York: Anchor Books, 1985), pp. 95–96.

declared that “it is important to United States security interests that all practical measures be taken to prevent further communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Indochina is a key area of Southeast Asia and is under immediate threat.”⁷⁸

After France’s debacle in Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, the US made a series of important decisions to replace France in Indochina. These included a willingness to defend Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam and to provide direct economic and military assistance to these states without going through France, the choice of Ngo Dinh Diem as a US collaborator and the US takeover of responsibility from France in the training of South Vietnamese forces.⁷⁹ Most of all, Eisenhower administration officials were motivated by their conviction that the Associated States of Indochina should be given independence without which America’s liberal project would not succeed.

However, Dulles and Eisenhower were well aware of the dilemma that their independence would entail. On the one hand, “it was essential,” Dulles stated, “to eliminate from the minds of the Asians any belief that we were intervening in Indochina in support of colonialism.” On the other hand, he did not think the Associated States were ready for “complete independence.” If they were “turned loose,” “it would be like putting a baby in a cage of hungry lions.” Therefore, the US had to take care of them through the formation of a SEATO. Otherwise, Dulles believed that “the baby would rapidly be devoured.”⁸⁰

This was the real dilemma Washington policymakers faced in responding to decolonization in the third world. Dulles stated in July

78 Report to the NSC by the DOS, NSC 64, February 27, 1950, *FRUS, 1950*, VI, 747.

79 For a more detailed analysis, see the author’s article, “Amerika ‘Teikoku’ no Keisei to Datsu Shokuminchika Katei e no Taio” [The Making of the American Empire and US Responses to Decolonization], in Katsuhiko Kitagawa, ed., *Datsu Shokuminchika to Igrisu Teikoku [Decolonization and the British Empire]* (Kyoto: Minerva Shobo, 2009), pp. 111–152, esp. 128–140.

80 Memorandum of conversation by the Counselor (MacArthur), May 11, 1954, re. “Informal and Unofficial Notes on Meeting at the White House on Indochina,” May 10, 1954, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, XIII, 1528.

1953 that the greatest danger in the world to small, weak states that were “relatively inexperienced in self-government” was Moscow’s aggressive policy. He noted that Stalin had once stated: “nationalism is a slogan which is to be used to break up the unity of the free world, and to obtain independence for various areas which the Soviet Union would then try to absorb into its own orbit.”⁸¹ Given the subsequent deepening of US military intervention in Vietnam, particularly after the Kennedy administration, it was ironic that Dulles’ above statement also applies to US responses to decolonization not only in the first Indochina War, but also in other areas of the world, including the Middle East during the Suez Crisis.

Perhaps Dulles was aware of it. In the aftermath of the Suez Crisis, the Secretary of State ruminated with President Eisenhower in the following words:

We must bear in mind that some of our friends felt that they were having to bear the burden of our present policies. In this connection, I referred to [Syngman] Rhee, Chiang [Kai-shek], the Dutch in Indonesia, the French in Indochina, the British, French and Israelis in the Middle East, and the Hungarians. All of them were being sacrificed to our policies. I mentioned that while we did not seek it, we in fact did tend by our anti-colonial policies gradually to replace British, French and Dutch interests in what had been their particular spheres and that there was a tendency on the part of those colonial countries to attribute this motivation to us.⁸²

81 US minutes of a meeting of representatives of the US, France, and the Associated States of Indochina, at the DOS, July 13, 1953, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, XIII, 675.

82 Memorandum of conversation with the President, December 3, 1956, Meeting with the President File, D. D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas, quoted in Ronald W. Pruessen, “John Foster Dulles and Decolonization in Southeast Asia,” in Marc Frey, Ronald W. Pruessen, and Tan Tai Yong, eds., *The Transformation of Southeast Asia: International Perspectives on Decolonization* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), pp. 226–240, esp. 240.