

Australia and the War in Vietnam 1960-1966

Australia dan Perang di Vietnam 1960-1966

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Abstract

This article analyses the Australian involvement in the conflict in Indochina. The involvement of the Australian defence forces in Vietnam was a departure from its 'normal' overseas missions such as in World War I and, prior to 1955 in the Middle East as it did not involve British forces. The Australians now worked independently with the United States without interference from its traditional ally, Britain. Apart from the two World Wars, the Vietnam War was the most serious military commitment in Australia's history with, at the peak period, more than 8000 troops involved. It was also the third most expensive in terms of casualties. The Vietnam conflict presented a venue for the American-Australian alliance to work closely in Southeast Asia. Both countries found a common enemy in this conflict, the Communists. It is important to analyse the alliance's influence on Australian involvement in Vietnam. To what extent did the Americans influence Australia's involvement in Vietnam? Did Australia become involved in this conflict because the American asked it to be involved or was its involvement based on its own national interest? These questions have been continuously debated by scholars. This article found out that Australia fully supported the US military involvement in this conflict as it needed the US to commit its military and gave more focus on the Communist expansionism into Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysian and Indonesian areas.

Keywords: Australia; Vietnam War; Australia Alliance; Communism; Military involvement.

Abstrak

Artikel ini menganalisis penglibatan Australia dalam konflik di Indochina. Penglibatan pasukan pertahanan Australia di Vietnam merupakan sesuatu yang di luar dari kebiasaan seperti dalam Perang Dunia Pertama dan, sebelum 1955 di Timur Tengah kerana ianya tidak melibatkan pasukan pertahan British. Australia kini bertindak dengan bebas bersama Amerika Syarikat tanpa melibatkan campurtangan dari sekutu tradisinya Britain. Selain dari dua

Perang Dunia, Perang Vietnam merupakan penglibatan ketenteraan yang paling serius dalam sejarah Australia dan di kemuncaknya lebih dari 8000 askar terlibat. Ia juga melibatkan kematian yang ketiga banyaknya. Konflik di Vietnam menjadi satu medan kerjasama perikatan Australia-Amerika untuk bekerja dengan lebih rapat lagi di Asia Tenggara. Kedua-dua negara menghadapi musuh yang sama iaitu Komunis. Analisis mengenai pengaruh perikatan Australia-Amerika terhadap penglibatan Australia di Vietnam penting untuk dikaji. Sejauh manakah Amerika Syarikat mempengaruhi penglibatan Australia di Vietnam? Adakah Australia terlibat dalam konflik ini kerana diminta oleh Amerika Syarikat atau adakah penglibatan Australia berdasarkan kepentingan negara itu sendiri? Persoalan-persoalan ini telah dibahaskan oleh sejarawan secara berterusan. Makalah ini mendapati sokongan Australia terhadap penglibatan ketenteraan Amerika Syarikat dalam konflik ini adalah kerana ia memerlukan Amerika Syarikat untuk memberikan lebih perhatian terhadap perluasan pengaruh Komunis di Asia Tenggara terutamanya di kawasan sekitar Malaysia dan Indonesia.

Kata kunci: *Australia; Perang Vietnam; Perikatan AS-Australia; Komunisme; Penglibatan ketenteraan.*

INTRODUCTION

Australia established diplomatic relations with the Republic of Vietnam in 1952 when it opened a legation in Saigon. This legation was also responsible for Laos and Cambodia and was upgraded to an Embassy in 1959. Australia's interpretation of the Vietnam conflict was very much similar to the United States' view. The Americans and Australians believed the conflict was a case of Communist expansion directed from China in a thrust downward into Southeast Asia. South Vietnam was seen as the first 'domino' and needed to be defended at any cost by the 'free world'. The Australian government was willingly involved in this conflict with the US on its own justification and considerations such as the policy of forward defence and Australia's own political interests in preserving the security of Southeast Asia from Communism.

This study uses a qualitative method in historical research that focuses on primary resources. Historical research was conducted through library and archival research by accessing primary sources at the National Archive of Australia, The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, and the Social Science and Humanities Library at the University of Queensland. The primary sources used in this research are the documents from the National Archives of Australia that are available online. Australia's involvement in Southeast Asia was officially documented in *The Official History of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1948-1975*. This series of official histories contains five titles: 'Emergency and Confrontation', 'Crises and Commitments', 'The Long Tan', 'Medicine at War', and 'The RAAF in Vietnam'. Most of the material available in this series is presented in narrative form with most of the focus given to armed forces operations in this region. These materials originated from published official documents and parliamentary records. The issue of decision making and the situation that led to the decisions for involvements are seldom discussed in these official books. Being official versions of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asia, these books view the events from an Australian perspective. The secondary sources also include books and journal articles regarding the issues has also been consulted. The documents in this research are analysed through a historical method which needs a principle of criticism and proper criticism procedures.

THE AUSTRALIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE VIETNAM PROBLEM

In the early 1950s, the Vietnam conflict was of lesser concern to the Australian government than the issues of the rearmament of Japan, the Korean War and the fall of China to the Communists. However, the Geneva Conference in 1954 marked a turning point in the response of Western powers, including Australia, to the fighting in Indochina. The Viet Minh attack on French Union forces at Dien Bien Phu and the prospect of a French defeat affected Australia's attitude towards this conflict. On 4th June 1954, in a submission to the Australian cabinet, Casey noted that the Defence Committee, in A Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy of 18th December 1952 viewed "Indochina is the key to the defence of South East Asia" (Frost 1987) The Australian government's idea on the defence of Indochina originated from the First Indochina War between France and the Viet Minh that started in 1946. This view came to dominate Australian politicians. In March 1950, the Australian Minister for External Affairs, Percy Spender, mentioned that Communist success in Vietnam would endanger Malaya, Thailand, Burma, and Indonesia (Woodard 2004). Australia reiterated its view on the danger of Communist expansion again in 1954 after the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. The Australian government believed that the fall of Dien Bien Phu would spread Communism to the entire area of Southeast Asia and affect the vital interests of many nations in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. Prime Minister, Robert Menzies felt that the "menace of aggressive Communism in Southeast Asia had not been removed" and the security of Australia "depended upon converting a temporary halt into a permanent one".¹

By the early 1960s, the Australian view of the Vietnam problem, which officially had not been changed since the early 1950s, proceeded to full and active support of the US intervention and the commitment of Australian combat forces. According to Frank Frost, Australian support for the American intervention was also in line with the Australian official interpretation of the origins and nature of the conflict in southern Vietnam as a "manifestation of Chinese-inspired Communists 'expansionism', which should be seen essentially as an attempt by North Vietnam to conquer the south" (Frost 1987). In a speech to Parliament on 21st August 1962, Minister for External Affairs, Garfield Barwick, argued that "the war in Vietnam is not a civil war. It is a new form of aggression by means of subversion and insurgency directed and equipped by Communist North Vietnam".² Barwick's speech clearly showed that Australian perceptions of the conflict were narrowly drawn as an invasion by Communist North Vietnam. Australia also saw North Vietnam as an agent of Communist China. Paul Hasluck, who succeeded Barwick as the Minister for External Affairs, stated in June 1964 that "the North Vietnamese regime is directing, supporting and controlling the insurgency in South Vietnam. Part of this was simply Annamite aggressiveness and the desire to dominate their neighbours, but part is the determination of China to establish Chinese hegemony throughout Southeast Asia, working in the first place through the agency of her North Vietnamese puppets" (Barclay 1985). The notion of 'invasion from the north' and that South Vietnam was the first 'domino' in a series of Southeast Asian 'dominoes', dominated Australian policy makers' view. The Australian governments fully subscribed to the domino theory³ from the middle of the 1950s and this theory lived through into the mid-1960s almost unquestioned by Australian defence planners. The domino theory led to the involvement of the Australian military to support the United States position in Vietnam as it also fitted with the Australian defence policy of keeping Communism as far away from the Australian mainland as possible.⁴ The domino theory then heavily influenced the Australian line of thinking and the formulation of Australian defence policy.⁵

The Australian government's preoccupation with the belief that China was behind the conflicts was in line with the context of the Cold War – rivalry between Communist nations and Western democracies in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This view sidelined the thought

that the whole conflict might be a ‘war of liberation’ or a ‘people’s war’ against French and Western colonialism; Australia did not give much consideration to that possibility because of its deep fear of Communism. The Australians also dismissed the possibility of the conflict being an internal revolution against an unpopular South Vietnam government and concentrated on the assumption that the basis of the crisis was the Viet Cong, North Vietnam and then China, and that the aim of the Viet Cong was to overthrow the South Vietnam administration. The Australian government assumed that Vietnam was a conflict designed by Communist China “to frustrate America’s willingness to stand and fight in Asia and to expose the non-credibility of anti-Communist professions of solidarity and courage of conviction” (Albinski 1970). This view was also heavily influenced by the US as the US believed that “the immediate and major source of Viet Minh military power is Communist China. With that source destroyed or neutralized, the Viet Minh would cease to present a major military problem to the French in Indo-China”.⁶ Throughout the Vietnam crisis, the pattern of the Australian officials’ response towards Vietnam very much echoed US officials’ opinion and interpretations. The Australian view of the conflict was also strengthened with the American interpretation as mentioned by Dulles in April 1954. Dulles stated that unless Indochina was held by anti-Communists forces, the whole area might collapse, and war would spread to Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia, and other countries in the area. Dulles made a call that “the countries with interests in this area should join forces, determined to resist and to make the Communists desist from their intentions to conquer all Southeast Asia”.⁷ Besides the American interpretation, the Australian views on the Vietnam conflict was also influenced by the Cold War and the increase of Communist influence in Southeast Asia in the early 1960s. The belief that China was behind this conflict was acknowledged in the ANZUS⁸ communiqué in 1965 where Communist China was accused by ANZUS members of supporting North Vietnam and targeting Thailand after South Vietnam.⁹

The similarity between Australian thinking and the US official views of the conflict is predictable as the Australian government from 1955 began to align its defence policy regarding containment of communism in Southeast Asia with the US. Although Australia agreed with US views regarding Vietnam, Australia differed with the US in ways to settle the sovereignty issue of West New Guinea. Australia was also eager to encourage the US to involve itself militarily in Southeast Asia especially in the Malayan and later Malaysian area.¹⁰ The involvement of the US in defending Southeast Asia was vital to Australian defence and security as the smaller Australian forces were incapable of doing so on their own. The Australian government’s decision to support the Americans in Vietnam was made under the influence of the defence situation faced by Australia and Britain in facing Communist subversion in Malaya and later in the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation.¹¹ The conflict in Vietnam was seen by Australia as a means to get the US militarily involved in Southeast Asia and Australia thought its commitment was necessary to secure counter commitment from the US in the future.

TOWARDS MILITARY INVOLVEMENT

During the period from 1960 to 1965, Australia was heavily preoccupied with problems in the Southeast Asian region, especially the West New Guinea issue, and from 1963 the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation, which led to military involvement by Australia to defend Malaysia in the northern Borneo area. Australian officials were also concerned with the widespread fighting between Viet Cong and South Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam. The Australian government felt the need for the US to play an active role in the defence of the Republic of Vietnam. On 15th September 1961, under instruction from Menzies, Sir Howard Beale, the Australian Ambassador in Washington, informed the US Deputy Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Alexis Johnson that “Australia would fulfil its obligations under SEATO¹²” and Australia “would not back away” if a decision to intervene militarily in Laos were made by

SEATO, or by the US and Asian allies, or even by the US itself.¹³ This statement was important as it was presented by the Australians in the early phase of the conflict and it showed Australia as willing to help the US not just in Vietnam but in Laos as well. It also indicated Australia's eagerness to be with the US even without any formal request by the Americans. Australia seemed to give a "blank cheque" promise to help in Vietnam before it was fully informed about US plans in the Southeast Asian area.

The Australian government's attitude was not surprising. Australia was keen to get the US militarily involved in Southeast Asia as Britain had decided to withdraw from east of Suez in the late 1950s. Frank Frost argues that "the years after 1960 were crucial in Australian policy towards Vietnam because Australian perception of the nature and implications of the Vietnamese conflict produced policies of full and active support for US intervention and, ultimately, the commitment of Australian combat forces" (Frost 1987). The *White Paper* titled *Australia's Military Commitment to Vietnam*, presented by Prime Minister Whitlam to the Australian Parliament in 1975, analysed the origins of Australia's military involvement and concluded that

The provision of military aid by Australia was decided upon political reasons and was in support of the fundamental aim of Australian policy towards South Vietnam, which was to ensure the long-term defence interests of Australia. These were seen in terms of the ANZUS and SEATO Treaties and the theory of forward defence against the victory of communism in South East Asia, an area seen as vital to Australia's future. This was a policy developed in Australia independently of any outside pressure. The cornerstone of this policy was seen as a compelling necessity to commit the power of the United States to the Asian area and thus to commit her to a practical guarantee of active support to Australia through the ANZUS and SEATO Treaties.¹⁴

Although the *White Paper* claimed that the Australian policy was independently developed, this claim is hard to accept as official documents from the Department of External Affairs often portrayed Australia as under the influence of the United States to commit its military support. The *White Paper* admitted that Australian government's plan was to get the US to commit its support to Australia in the ANZUS and SEATO Treaties. It acknowledged that Australia's involvement in Vietnam was in the interests of Australian defence in the long term and not to preserve South Vietnam from communism or on the request of the South Vietnamese government.¹⁵

In November 1961, a report from Australian intelligence argued that the South Vietnam forces might be incapable of launching offensive operations against the Viet Minh in six months without assistance from foreign military intervention. Following this report the Australian government became increasingly aware that the US was also deeply concerned at the situation in South Vietnam and was considering a military intervention (Frost 1987). General Maxwell Taylor, military adviser to President Kennedy concluded that the US military, financial and political aid would bring victory to the US and suggested to Kennedy that he send 8000 US combat troops to Vietnam (Roberts and Olson 1991). The United States then informed Australia in the same month that it was considering increasing assistance to the Republic of Vietnam. Beale reported in December 1961 that "demonstrable Australian support for the RVN would make a very favourable impression on the United States administration".¹⁶ This statement demonstrated that one of the considerations of the Australian involvement in Vietnam was to impress the Kennedy administration, and that it was not based on the actual needs of, or request by, the South Vietnamese. The possibility of assistance to the Republic of Vietnam was then formally considered by the External Affairs Department on 14th December. Beale suggested that Australia should supply military advisers and small arms. On 19th

December, four days after Kennedy restated the US commitment to an independent Vietnam, the Australian Ambassador was informed that although “Australia could supply some small arms and ammunition it could make no more than a token contribution in training.”¹⁷ That the Australian government took just a few days to make a decision to supply arms and ammunition showed the readiness of Australian officials to be involved with the United States.

In March 1962, Australia received two approaches for assistance from the Republic of Vietnam. The first was from the Assistant Defence Minister of Vietnam; however, documents available did not further elaborate on this request. The second was from President Diem. Diem addressed a letter dated 31st March 1962 to ninety-three non-Communist states, including Australia, requesting assistance to help the Republic of Vietnam from being overwhelmed by massive subversion from North Vietnam. Menzies responded to Diem’s request only on 14th May 1962, after consultation with the United States at the 8th to 9th May 1962 ANZUS Council meeting in Canberra. The Council meeting acknowledged that South Vietnam needed to defend itself against Communist insurgency and held North Vietnam responsible for the conflict in the south. In his response Menzies stated that Australia shared President Diem’s view that North Vietnam was “engaged in a calculated campaign of armed insurgency to subjugate the Republic of Viet Nam” and assured Diem that Australia would support efforts to maintain South Vietnam’s independence and would send aid to South Vietnam.¹⁸ The Australian government stated that the aid was sent at the request of the South Vietnamese government and should be put under the SEATO banner to avoid any impression of Western countries meddling in Asian countries’ affairs. The Australian government’s claim that its help was under its SEATO obligations was questionable, as there was no consultation with other SEATO members prior to the announcement. Only in 1975 that the Australian Labor government finally acknowledged the truth that “Australian military assistance to South Vietnam was not at any time in response to a request for defence aid from South Vietnam as a Protocol State¹⁹ to SEATO as a Treaty organisation”.²⁰ The admission by the Australian government confirmed that the requests for aid from Australia to South Vietnam originated from the United States and not from the South Vietnamese government. Australian military involvement in Vietnam was also to support the Australian forward defence policy to which the Australian government subscribed. In order to satisfy the Australian public and also not to be appeared as meddling in the internal affairs of Asian countries, the Australian government used SEATO as the reason for its aid. The Australian government also did not reveal to its public that the aid was requested by the United States.

At the same ANZUS Council meeting on 9th May 1962, Menzies informed Admiral H.D. Felt, Commander of the US Pacific Fleet, that Australia was willing to supply military advisers “provided that a request was received from the Republic of Vietnam”.²¹ Admiral Felt stated that although at that time Australian military assistance was not needed, the Americans regarded an Australian military presence in South Vietnam as most important and suggested that Australia might also supply two radar patrol ships, engineer units, a signals unit, and one transport aircraft. The Australian Defence Committee recommended on 17th May 1962 that Australia provided thirty Army personnel for training who were ordered specifically to avoid combat. The Defence Minister, Athol Townley, in a press statement on 24th May 1962, stated that “at the invitation of the government of the Republic of Vietnam, Australia was sending a group of military instructors to that country” (Frost 1987). Australia’s willingness to give military assistance was well received in Washington. President Kennedy personally acknowledged to Menzies during the Prime Minister’s visit to Washington in June 1962 his satisfaction with “Australian active interest in supporting the Government of Viet-Nam against subversion and aggression organised and directed from abroad”.²² Menzies trip to Washington was held after Australian Minister External Affairs, Sir Garfield Barwick’s visit to Quang Ngai, South Vietnam. During his visit, Garfield was speaking to a crowd about 2000 people

reaffirming Australia's support towards South Vietnam. Barwick declared that "Australian aid to South Vietnam is not at an end. My visit will help Australia to explore and I have no doubt, find further ways to assist with supplies in the effectiveness of your self-defence. We may well look back to this year as the turn of the tide."²³ The first Australian military advisers arrived in South Vietnam in July 1962.

Australia's response to the conflict in Vietnam was also influenced by the earlier American proposal for joint military intervention. The concept of "united action" by allies to deter China was a feature of the US plans as early as 1954 when the situation in Indochina began to deteriorate seriously.²⁴ It was suggested in 1954 by the US that if Communist China stepped up its activities in Southeast Asia, the US and its allies would launch massive retaliation by sea and air. This suggestion for "united actions", it hoped, would force Communist China to refrain from venturing further into Southeast Asia. The Americans decided in April 1954 that they "could not stand by passively and let Southeast Asia go by default to the Communists" and suggested that countries with interests in Southeast Asia, which included Britain, Australia, New Zealand, France, the Associated State in Indochina, Burma, and the Philippines, should join the effort to overcome the Communist threat.²⁵

In April 1964, the SEATO council meeting held in Manila agreed that its members should, if necessary, be prepared to take further action to support the Republic of Vietnam. On 6th May, the US made a request for an Australian military presence by stressing President Johnson's desire for more "free world" countries to "show their flags" in South Vietnam (Frost 1987). President Johnson's assumption of the presidency after the assassination of Kennedy in November 1963 coincided with a deterioration of the situation in South Vietnam, especially in the Mekong Delta area. The situation in this area was alarming following the coup and assassination of President Diem in early November 1963. The call by President Johnson was not much different from the US policy in 1954 which stated that "military measures should be on as broad a multi-national basis as possible. Only under the most extreme circumstances, if at all, should the United States take such military measures alone".²⁶ The US then suggested that Australia, New Zealand, and Britain provide a wide range of military personnel. The Australian government's defence advisers considered the United States' suggestion and, on 8th June 1964, the Minister for Defence, Senator Shane Paltridge, announced that the number of advisers in South Vietnam would be doubled to sixty, and a squadron of Royal Australian Air Force Caribou aircraft would also be committed. The announcement by Senator Paltridge was made following the recommendation by the Australian Embassy in Washington and the Department of External Affairs. The Australian Embassy recommended that Australia "should make as prompt and positive a response as possible" and "pick up a lot of credit from the United States."²⁷ The Australian government believed that its positive response to the American request would create such a "habitual closeness" with the Americans in terms of the "mutual alliance that in our time of need (the possibility of a crisis in relations with Indonesia) the United States would have little option but to respond as we [Australia] would want." This statement clearly showed the mind of the Australian government that its involvement in Vietnam was based on its political and strategic alliance with the US in the hope that the US would extend its military assistance to Australia should Australia need it in the future. At this time, Australia was also involved in the Indonesian-Malaysian conflict; Australia hoped that its "habitual closeness" would bring the Americans to the defence of Malaysia or give assistance to the Australian forces in the Malaysian area. The years 1964 to mid-1965 saw an increasing Australian concern with the growing influence of the Communists in Indonesia that might threaten its security. Barwick, in an address to the Australian Institute of Political Affairs on 25th January 1964, reiterated that Australia's relations with Indonesia have "for some considerable time been a matter of grave concern" to the Australian Government. Barwick also highlighted the difference between Australia and Indonesia regarding the formation of

Malaysia, which Indonesia planned to “crush”.²⁸ The US did not view the Indonesian Communists as a serious threat to Southeast Asia or even to the Indonesian government. Australia had a different view and was worried that Indonesia might turn Communist and become a threat at its own doorstep. It is safe to conclude that the fear of Indonesia was also one of the reasons why Australia fully supported the US in Vietnam.

The Liberal-Country Party under Menzies and later Harold Holt viewed the Vietnamese conflict seriously and felt that Vietnam was a test of the anti-Communists willingness to fight (Murphy 1993). The Vietnam conflict was the main reason for the introduction by the Australian government of conscription for military service. Conscription was announced on 10th November 1964 as a measure to expand the Australian armed forces. In announcing the system of conscription by ballot for two years’ military service, Prime Minister Menzies stated that a “defence emergency” had resulted from “the recent Indonesian policies and actions and the growth of Communist influence and armed activity in Laos and South Vietnam” (Frost 1987). Conscription was opposed by the Labor Party, and especially by its leader Arthur Calwell. Calwell and the Labor Party believed that Australia should not be involved in foreign wars and opposed the idea of sending Australian youth away “to fight and die in a cruel, filthy, brutal, unwinnable war in Vietnam mangrove swamps” (Albinski 1970). However, the Liberal-Country Coalition was able to exploit the Vietnam War and Australian public fear of communism and later in 1966 won a big majority in the general elections where conscription was one of the major issues.

On 1st December 1964, the issue of military commitment to Vietnam was discussed by the Americans at a meeting in the White House. The US decided that aid should be sought from “key allies” including Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and the Philippines (Albinski 1970). From 1954, the US had constantly stated it would not intervene in Indochina unless as part of a collective operation. The US stressed that “the danger to US was great but it was less than the danger to Malaya, New Zealand, Australia and the Philippines.”²⁹ The danger to Southeast Asia should be met with “unity of will and unity of action” and the US believed that if the threat were not overcome one area by one area, all of Southeast Asia would be lost to the Communists. In line with the widely subscribed Domino Theory, if such were to happen, Indochina would fall, followed by Thailand. Malaya would also fall or be held only by very costly operations. Indonesia would surely be lost to the Communists. The dangers to Australia and New Zealand would be greatly increased. The Americans also stressed that they themselves were further from the source of danger, and pressured other countries to go along with the US in Vietnam. From the mid-1950s, the US was pressuring other countries to join its cause in Vietnam and made clear the ‘consequences’ to other free countries should Vietnam fail to be defended. The US had been stressing the political significance of Indochina since 1954 when President Eisenhower promoted the ‘Domino Theory’ to justify the importance of military intervention in Indochina. The “consequences” of a failure to defend Vietnam stressed by the American were echoed in the policy held by Australia. This similarity was not surprising as the foreign policy of Australian government from late 1949, was influenced by the Cold War in Europe and Asia, decolonisation of European empires in Asia, and the rise of Communist influence in Southeast Asia.

On 14th December 1964, Menzies received a request from President Johnson for further Australian military assistance, including a group of 200 military advisers and minesweepers. On 18th December 1964, Menzies replied to the request by stating that Australia was unable to supply many more military advisers but that it was willing to send representatives to discuss the possible positioning of the US, Australian and New Zealand troops in the northern parts of South Vietnam (Sexton 1981). The Australian Cabinet considered the situation in Vietnam and decided to send an additional seventeen advisers, bringing the training team strength up to one hundred. On 20th February 1965, the US agreed to hold the staff talks suggested by

Australia in December 1964. The conclusion of the talks was that the US wished to have a contribution of Australian forces in South Vietnam. Australia formally offered the commitment of a battalion to the US on 13th April and the offer was accepted with pleasure by the US Secretary of State, Dean Rusk (Sexton 1981). The Australian Ambassador then reported that Secretary of State Rusk understood that “further dispersal of Australian forces might require Australia to look for support from the United States” and President Johnson was “fully aware of the United States commitment pursuant to the ANZUS Treaty.”³⁰ The request for Australian military assistance in December 1964 was significant as it was a direct request by the United States and not from the government of South Vietnam and Australia agreed to offer its troop to the United States. As a superpower that had much larger military forces, the US actually did not need any military assistance from Australia. The request was simply to cover US involvement in South Vietnam so as not to appear to be replacing French colonialism. The US also wanted to make its involvement in Vietnam to look like a multi-national coalition rather than purely an American military operation.

Australia also provided economic assistance in support for its involvement in Vietnam. As early as 1956 the Australian Government offered to make available the amount of £A2 million for economic assistance. Two years later the amount was increased to £A3 million.³¹ The assistance has included communication and earth moving equipment, tents, medical and dental supplies, cloth for uniforms, blankets, ambulances, staff cars, railroad tankers and a survey vessel. Of the total of £A3 million offered expenditure to 30 June 1961 amounted to £A1,947,962.

At the end of April 1965, Menzies declared in a speech to Parliament that “the takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the countries of South and Southeast Asia”. Menzies continued by adding that the Vietnam conflict “must be seen as part of a thrust by Communists China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans” (Frost 1987). Menzies’ speech was simply to justify Australian involvement in Vietnam by using the fear of the Communists and also ‘Asian’ threat to Australia. Australia believed that committing its military forces in Vietnam was necessary in order to support the United States commitment towards the area and at the same time would guarantee US support for Australia through the ANZUS and SEATO Treaties. The military assistance from Australia to the US in Vietnam also illustrated Australian political thinking of the importance of the alliance with the Americans and the need to submit to American wishes and paid little attention to the actual needs of the South Vietnam government. The South Vietnamese government was merely being informed of the Australian government’s decision to increase its troops “either shortly before or after the announcement” being made by Canberra.³²

To Menzies, and other leaders of the Liberal-Country Party government, what Australia needed most was support from the United States for its defence and to overcome what it believed to be a serious Communist encroachment in the Southeast Asian area. To get this support, Australia would do its best to give cooperation to the US in its Vietnam policy in order to show it was a true ally of the United States.

CONCLUSION

Australian decision making to become involved in Vietnam was influenced by the Cold War in Europe and Asia, and the rise of Communist influence in Southeast Asia especially after the fall of China in 1949. Its involvement in the Vietnam conflict was based on Australia’s self-interest, especially in terms of ‘forward defence’ and to support the alliance with the US. However, based on capabilities, Australia would not have become involved in Vietnam if the US had not first become involved. Throughout the Vietnam conflict, Australian governments

constantly calculated whether their decisions and actions with regard to Vietnam were in line with US policy and sought to impress the United States as its true ally.

Australia fully supported the US military involvement in this conflict as it needed the US to commit its military and gave more focus on the Communist expansionism into Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysian and Indonesian areas. Australia's involvement would also give a positive image to the American intervention in Vietnam as it would present an alliance involvement and not a replacement for French colonialism.

Both the Australians and the Americans saw this conflict as a Chinese Communists thrust to the south with the aim of conquering Southeast Asia. Vietnam was the first domino and after its fall, other countries would fall into Communists hands. Subscribing to this thought, Australia never considered Vietnam itself as a threat, but Communist China and the Communists elements in Indonesia were. The Australians as well as most other democracies, tended to generalise and assume all Communists as a superpower on the way to conquer the world. The theme of 'threat to Australia' was used constantly by Australian politicians in Parliament and in statements to the public. The Australians put great care into timing their responses to any American suggestion as they wanted all announcements or statements of support for the Americans to have maximum impact on the Americans and to portray Australia as a worthy ally.

The Australian government was worried that the US might lose interest in Southeast Asia, thus exposing Australia to the threat of Communism. The Australian government believed its military support was a way to keep the US interested in helping the free countries of Southeast Asia. However, the Americans refused to be militarily involved in Malaysia as intended by Australia. Australia, with its small population, could not afford to face the conflict in Southeast Asia alone. It needed a strong alliance with a military capability to help Australia defend itself. The instability of Southeast Asia and the need for alliance heavily influenced the Australian decision in its 'forward defence' strategy. In this strategy, war and the enemy would be held as far as possible from Australian soil. The Australian government would work to create a buffer zone between Australia and Communist countries.

To sum up, the United States was Australia's main consideration in becoming involved in Vietnam. Australian policies, decisions and actions in Vietnam were taken with the objective of impressing the US and to achieve a maximum impact in Washington. Besides this, Australian enthusiasm to help the US in Vietnam can clearly be seen in 1964, when the US hinted that they would appreciate Australia increasing its military commitment. The result was an almost immediate increase being approved by the Australian government. Australian officials in Washington, Saigon and even Canberra tried hard to think what the US wanted and sought to present Australia's contribution at the right time to get credit from the Americans.

From the mid-1960s, Australia had already tied its Vietnam policy to go 'all the way' to achieve the United States' objectives. The United States -Australia alliance had reached a new level of subordination. Australia formulated its policies and decisions to accommodate the alliance and the alliance heavily influenced Australian thoughts on the situation in Vietnam.

NOTES

* This article was originally part of the author's PhD thesis, submitted at the University of Queensland Australia in 2010.

¹ Extract from Radio Malaya Monitoring Report of Radio Australia 10.30pm (local time) News Session on 22nd July 1954 in A4968 (A4968/2) 25/23/1 Part 5, Indo China [Indochina] – Geneva 15th – 31st July 1954, National Archives Australia.

² *Current Notes on International Affairs*, vol. 33, No. 8, (August 1962), pp. 54-55.

³ Domino Theory was a Cold War policy that suggested a communist takeover in one nation would quickly lead to communist takeovers in neighbouring states, each falling like a perfectly aligned row of dominos. In Southeast Asia, the U.S. government used the domino theory to justify its involvement in the Vietnam War and its support for a non-communist dictator in South Vietnam.

⁴ The Australian support to the US military involvement in Southeast Asia was originated in World War II after the fall of Singapore to the Japanese. The US was chosen to replace the UK as 'our great and powerful friend'. For Australia defence policy see also Alan Stephens, *Dien Bien Phu and the Defence of Australia* (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, 2007).

⁵ The Australian foreign policy from late 1949 was heavily influenced by the Cold War in Europe and Asia, decolonization of European empires in Asia, and the rise of Communist influence in Southeast Asia see also

⁶ Memorandum by the Chief of Staff, United States Army (Ridgway) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, 6 April 1954, in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1952-1954*, vol. XIII, (United States Government Printing Office, Washington D.C., 1982), p. 1269.

⁷ The First Secretary of Embassy in France (Godley) to the Department of State, 21 April 1954, in *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol. XIII, p. 1329.

⁸ The Treaty of ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, and the United States) was signed in San Francisco on 1 September 1951. The treaty was the culmination of Australian efforts to link up with the US in a security arrangement covering the Pacific.

⁹ Department of External Affairs, Inward Cablegram from Australian Embassy Washington, 28 June 1965 in A1945/42 16/3/5 *ANZUS Council Meeting 1963*, NAA.

¹⁰ See Sah-Hadiyatan Ismail (2011) "Australia and the West New Guinea Problem 1949-1959", *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, vol. 04, Number 13, 2011, pp. 41-57

¹¹ In March 1955, Menzies and President Eisenhower had discussed on the issue of the defence of Malaya and the eventual US assistance and cooperation to the British Commonwealth forces in the area. See "Memorandum of a Conversation, White House, Washington, 14 March 1955", *Foreign Relations of the United States 1955-1957*, vol XXI, (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), p. 63

¹² The Southeast Asia Collective Defence Treaty also known as the Manila Treaty established the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was a mechanism whereby the United States, Britain, France, Australia, and New Zealand undertook to protect a number of states in Southeast Asia.

¹³ Outgoing Telegram, Department of State, 16 September 1961, Australia General 3/3/61-12/31/61, National Security Files, Series 1, Countries, JFK Library.

¹⁴ Australia, *Australia's Military Commitment To Vietnam* (Canberra, May 1975), p. 2-3.

¹⁵ With the decline of British power after World War II, an alliance with the United States was much anticipated by Australians policy makers. For further discussion on the shift in defence alliance see, Joseph Camilleri, *ANZUS, Australia's Predicament in the Nuclear Age*,

Melbourne: Macmillan, 1987, and Joseph Camilleri, *Australian-American Relations: the Web of Dependence*, South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1980.

¹⁶ *Australia's Military Commitment To Vietnam*, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Menzies to Diem, 14 May 1962, *Current Notes on International Affairs*, (June 1962), p.39.

¹⁹ The SEATO 'Protocol State' - Laos, Cambodia, and the free territory under the jurisdiction of the State of Vietnam (South Vietnam) was considered as being areas subject to the provisions of the treaty.

²⁰ *Australia's Military Commitment To Vietnam*, p. 2.; The Liberal Party government, in power since 1949, was defeated by the Labor Party under the leadership of Gough Whitlam in the 1972 General Elections.

²¹ Australia, *Australia's Military Commitment To Vietnam Ibid.*, p.6.

²² Office of the White House Press Secretary, June 20, 1962, Australia, Menzies Visit 6/62, President Office Files, Series 9, Countries, JFK Library; *Current Notes on International Affairs*, June 1962, p.36.

²³ A.B.C. News – 12.30 P.M., Friday, 1st June 1962 in A1838, 3014/10/15/1 Part 2, South Vietnam – Relations with Australia – Assistance to counter emergency programme [3cm]

²⁴ The concept of "united action" by Western powers was a feature of the United States' plan as early as 1954. It was suggested that the US and its allies would launch massive retaliation by sea and air to refrain Communist powers from venturing further in to Southeast Asia.

²⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Drumright), Washington, 2 April 1954, in *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol. XIII, p. 1215.

²⁶ Memorandum by the Chief of Staff, United States Army (Ridgway) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, 6 April 1954, in *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol. XIII, p. 1269.

²⁷ *Australia's Military Commitment To Vietnam*, p. 9.

²⁸ "Australia's Foreign Relations" *Current Notes in International Affairs*, (January 1964), pp 5-26.

²⁹ Memorandum of Conversation, by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Bonbright), Washington, 7 April 1954, in *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol. XIII, p. 1275.

³⁰ *Australia's Military Commitment To Vietnam*, p. 17.

³¹ Australia Aid Programme to Counter Communist Threat in South East Asia in A1838, 3014/10/15/1 South Vietnam – Relations with Australia – Assistance to counter insurgency programme, National Archives of Australia.

³² *Australia's Military Commitment To Vietnam*, p. 23.

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