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Singapore and the Vietnam war

Ang Cheng Guan

This article attempts to fill two gaps in two sets of inter-related historiographies, that of the diplomatic history of Singapore and that of the Vietnam war. For a number of reasons, not much had been published about the foreign policy of Singapore from the historical perspective. The Southeast Asian dimension of the Vietnam war is also starkly missing from the voluminous literature on the war. This article thus tries to describe and explain Singapore's attitude towards the war as it evolved over the ten years — from 1965, when the war really began and which coincided with the year that Singapore became independent, to 1975, a period which overlaps with the first ten years of Singapore's independence. Hopefully, this study will provide an understanding of one aspect of Singapore's foreign policy in its first 10 years as well as offer one Southeast Asian perspective on the Vietnam war.

Introduction

This paper attempts to fill two gaps in two sets of historiography, one pertaining to the history of Singapore post-independence, and the other, the Vietnam war or more accurately, the second Indochina war. The two are not unrelated. For a decade or more after Singapore became a sovereign state in 1965, little emphasis or attention was given to its history. This state of affairs remained until the 1980s when the political leadership began to be concerned that 'Singapore society was undergoing change far too rapidly' and 'that by "breaking loose from (their) historical moorings"', Singapore could evolve into a 'rootless and transient society… anchoring (their) future on the unsettling foundation of rapid changes'.[1] The history of Singapore written since the 1980s was in the main social and cultural history or what has been described as *history from below*. The economic history of Singapore has also been fairly well documented. However, until today, there were comparatively few historical writings on the diplomatic (and military) history of Singapore, if any, apart from the

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1 Quoted in Albert Lau, 'The national past and the writing of the history of Singapore', in *Imagining Singapore*, ed. Ban Kah Choon *et al.* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992), p. 52.

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subject of the Second World War and the Japanese Occupation of Singapore[2] while the post-war political history of Singapore principally dealt with the issues of merger and separation from Malaysia, and their immediate aftermath.[3] There are at least two main reasons for this: one, at the time when history and historical writing was given attention in Singapore, the Annales School of historical writing, and its various streams, was very popular, whereas diplomatic history, with its emphasis on politics, diplomacy and war, was considered old-fashioned. Two (and perhaps more importantly), the records/archives of the Singapore foreign and defence ministries, up till the present, remain tightly closed, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for diplomatic historians to develop their craft. In response to a suggestion for Singapore to adopt a 30-year declassification rule, then deputy prime minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, said, 'I think 30 years is not a long time. One hundred years maybe – our grandchildren can think about it.'[4]

Besides the lack of archival sources, there is also little public interest in foreign policy. S. Rajaratnam, the first foreign minister of Singapore, recalled that the average Singaporean's interest in foreign affairs is minimal. He noted that 'Singaporeans by and large are really parochial … despite the fact that quite a lot of Singapore politics had a foreign policy dimension because the pro-CP (Communist Party) elements were trying to use Singapore and the political struggle in Singapore to advance the foreign policy interests of China.' The late minister revealed that as Singaporeans were on the whole indifferent, 'foreign policy was shaped more objectively by myself, the Prime Minister, and Dr Goh [Keng Swee] where there were economic implications. Foreign policy making has not been a public football.'[5]

Turning to the historiography of the Vietnam war, apart from a few isolated and some tangential studies (which touched on the Southeast Asian perspective(s)),[6] the Southeast Asian dimension of the conflict is noticeably lacking in the historiography of the conflict. There has not been a full and proper historical account of the Vietnam war from the Singapore angle, although the Singapore leadership, particularly the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, had been one of, if not the most vocal and

2 Refer to Edwin Lee, 'The historiography of Singapore', in *Singapore studies: Critical survey of the humanities and social sciences*, ed. Basant K. Kapur (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1986), pp. 24–7.

3 Ibid., pp. 27–30.

4 'In Parliament: Cabinet secrets', in *Today* (Singapore), 14 Mar. 2003.

5 *The prophetic & the political: Selected speeches and writings of S. Rajaratnam*, ed. Chan Heng Chee and Obaid ul Haq (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1987), pp. 485–6.

6 Refer to Pamela Sodhy, 'The Malaysian connection in the Vietnam war', in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 9, 1 (1987): 38–53; Danny Wong Tze-Ken, *Vietnam-Malaysia relations during the Cold War 1945–1990* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1995); Arne Kislenko, 'Bamboo in the shadows: Relations between the United States and Thailand during the Vietnam war', in *America, the Vietnam war and the world: Comparative & international perspectives*, ed. Andreas W. Daum *et al.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 9; Arne Kislenko, 'A not so silent partner: Thailand's role in covert operations, counter-insurgency, and the wars in Indochina', in *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 24, 1 (2004): 65–96. Some tangential studies include: Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's 'More flags': The hiring of Korean, Filipino and Thai soldiers in the Vietnam war* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1994); *New perspectives on the Vietnam war: Our allies' views*, ed. William Schoenl (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002).

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well-known, 'subscriber' of the domino theory and supporter of the American presence in Vietnam. This is ironic given the fact that the vision of falling dominoes in Southeast Asia goes back to as early as 1949 when the nationalists were forced to withdraw from mainland China. The 'domino theory' had been expressed in one form or another in the National Security Council (NSC) documents 48/1 (June 1949), 64 (February 1950) and 124/2 (June 1952), as well as President Dwight Eisenhower's press conference on 7 April 1954, which is perhaps the best known (and the first public) explanation of the domino theory with regard to Southeast Asia. The unavailability of primary sources is a major reason for this omission. Although the Cold War ended more than a decade ago, there is no indication that Southeast Asian governments are considering making documents of the Cold War years accessible to scholars soon. But as the late historian Gordon Alexander Craig pointed out in a slightly different context, even though most of the documents might not be available and the archives are likely to remain closed, it should not discourage historians from tackling such subjects, and there are accomplished examples of what could be achieved by the clever use of memoirs, official accounts and press coverage.[7]

An appropriate year to begin this account is 1965. Singapore became fully independent on 9 August 1965. Prior to this, foreign and defence policies came under the purview of London, and for about two years after 1963, Kuala Lumpur. The year 1965 is also often considered to be the year in which the military war between the US and the Vietnamese communists began. The Vietnam war continued until April 1975, which coincided with the first decade of Singapore's independence.

Background

It is, however, useful to first begin with some brief background of events related to Singapore and also in Vietnam prior to 1965. In a nutshell, Singapore's experience with communism prior to independence began with the formation of the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU) in December 1945. The MDU was apparently a front for the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM).[8] From 1948, the British and Malayan forces fought a communist insurgency in the Malay peninsula.[9] With the declaration of the Emergency in June 1948 (first in Malaya and soon after, in Singapore), the CPM was proscribed and the MDU subsequently dissolved. This, according to John Drysdale, marked 'the end of the first communist attempt in Singapore to carry out an urban revolution through a united front', and the entire communist movement went underground.[10]

7 Gordon A. Craig, 'The historian and the study of international relations' (Presidential Address delivered at the 97th Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, Washington, DC, 28–30 Dec. 1982).

8 John Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle for success* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1984), p. 20; Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998), pp. 88–9; T.N. Harper, *The end of empire and the making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 89; Chin Peng, *My side of the story* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2003), p. 155.

9 For a Malayan communist account, refer to Chin Peng, *My side of the story* (Singapore: Media Masters, 2003). See also, *Dialogues with Chin Peng: New light on the Malayan Communist Party*, ed. C.C. Chin and Karl Hack (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004).

10 Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle for success*, pp. 20 and 30.

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Although American intelligence noted that there was a marked increase of communist-inspired and directed activities in Singapore[11] after the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu and the 1954 Geneva Conference, Chin Peng recalled that any lesson they could have learned from that spectacular victory came too late. From about 1955 when the British were clearly winning the war against the communists in Malaya, the latter began to switch from terrorism to subversion in the schools and labour unions, particularly in Singapore. According to the official history of the CPM, in the 1950s the party adopted the 'open and legal form of struggle to mount mass actions on a large scale in Singapore'. The party also sent cadres to set up the People's Action Party (PAP) jointly with Lee Kuan Yew (the PAP was formed in November 1954). The CPM also mobilised the masses to support the PAP in the 1959 Singapore elections, ensuring a landslide victory for the PAP,[12] which we will return to later. An American study noted that the British were so focused on anti-guerrilla military action for the last seven years that they were ill-prepared to respond to the 'alarming inroads which communist subversion has made in the schools, trade unions, press, and political parties of Singapore and, to a lesser extent, the Federation of Malaya'.[13]

Meanwhile, in Indochina, the 1954 Geneva Conference marked the end of the first Indochina war dividing Vietnam into two parts temporarily. Lee's assessment then was that Vietnam was not the best place to draw the line. He was worried that the ground was 'too soggy' there and the line should have been drawn west of the Mekong instead.[14] By 1956, it was obvious (though not unexpected) that the reunification of North and South Vietnam through a general election as agreed to in the 1954 Geneva Accords would not take place. After a brief respite, the communist armed struggle for the reunification of Vietnam began in 1959.

The Federation of Malaya achieved independence on 31 August 1957. By 1958, the CPM leadership had completed a revision of its battlefield strategy and concluded that in order to survive and to continue the military struggle, they had to direct future military activities from bases outside peninsular Malaya. The communist pressure on Malaya was clearly easing. Since early 1958, Kuala Lumpur could afford to clandestinely (against the terms of the 1954 Geneva Agreements) give aid to South Vietnam. When the Malayan Emergency officially ended in July 1960, Prime Minister Tungku Abdul Rahman secretly sent all the arms and equipment which had been used to fight the communists to Ngo Dinh Diem. In his words, 'we both faced a common enemy, though we were miles apart in our ways of life'.[15]

As mentioned above, in May 1959, Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP achieved political power which coincided with the start of the gradual resumption of the communist

11 Memorandum from the Deputy Director for Plans of the Central Intelligence Agency (Wisner) to the President's Special Assistant (Rockefeller), Washington, 1 June 1955, in *FRUS*, 1955–57, vol. 22, Southeast Asia, pp. 735–6.

12 *Voice of Malayan revolution*, 27 June 1981, part 5; Chin Peng, *My side of history*, p. 409; See also, Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore story*.

13 Staff study prepared by an interdepartmental committee for the Operations Coordinating Board, Washington, 14 Dec. 1955 in *FRUS*, 1955–57, vol. 22, Southeast Asia, pp. 744–54.

14 Memorandum of Conversation, 12 May 1969, RG 59, Box 2479, POL 7 Singapore.

15 Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra, *Looking back: The historic years of Malaya and Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1977), pp. 140–2.

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armed struggle in Vietnam. At this time, the CPM was preoccupied with the complicated process of winding down the armed struggle in Malaya.[16] The official history of the CPM revealed that as a consequence of the 'right-opportunist line' of 1954, the party lacked a comprehensive and long-term view, and had placed too much focus on the open struggle. For example, it downgraded the role of secret organisations. As a result, the communists suffered seriously in the face of full-scale suppression by the authorities. Nevertheless, they did preserve a 'well-tempered revolutionary armed force and quite an extensive guerrilla base area in the border region'.[17]

In his memoir, Chin Peng confirmed the regional connections of the communist movement when he described the close cooperation of Siamese, Laos, Vietnamese and Chinese communist parties, which made it possible for him to make the hazardous journey to Beijing. He also mentioned Ho Chi Minh, Le Duan and Le Duc Tho in Hanoi, as well as the Sino-Soviet schism and how that affected the Southeast Asian communist parties. He recalled that the CPM's presence in Hanoi on May Day of 1961 had to be inconspicuous because Hanoi had a vested interest in avoiding any form of alignment in the Sino-Soviet conflict and thus 'to have had a line-up of Chinese guests on the official May Day viewing dais or at some other prominent location – albeit Chinese from Malaya – would certainly have signaled the wrong message and endangered Hanoi's cultivated neutrality'.[18] In Beijing, amongst other Chinese leaders, he met Deng Xiaoping in July 1961 who 'knew the minds and plans of the Burmese, Siamese, Lao, Cambodia and Indonesian comrades who all maintained important training facilities in Chin at this time'. Chin Peng also revealed that the CPM actually reversed their 1959 decision to abandon armed struggles 'to accommodate Beijing and Hanoi and their Indochina aspiration'. The Chinese also began funding the CPM from 1961 (and not earlier, as claimed by the western media). As Chin Peng said, 'the nub of our position was the success or failure for the CPM's return to armed struggle rested on the degree of assistance Beijing was willing to extend'.[19]

Although the British officially won the military fight against the communists in the Federation of Malaya with the declaration of the end of the Emergency in July 1960, the communist threat was still not completely eradicated. According to the CPM official account, in September 1961, at the 11th enlarged plenary session of the Central Committee, the leadership corrected the 'right-opportunist line' and reaffirmed the correct line of carrying the armed struggle through to the end. A new policy was put in place. A number of revolutionary mass organisations were formed and base areas and guerrilla zones were rapidly revived and gradually consolidated.[20] Earl G. Drake who arrived in Kuala Lumpur at the end of 1961 as first secretary of the Canadian High Commission recalled that when he arrived, the military fight had been largely won although he once saw the smoke from a 'communist terrorist'

16 Chin Peng, *My side of history*, p. 409; Aloysius Chin, *The Communist Party of Malaya: The inside story* (Kuala Lumpur: Vinpress, 1995), ch. 4 and 5.
17 *Voice of Malayan revolution*, 27 June 1981, part 5.
18 Chin Peng, *My side of history*, pp. 420–1. See also ch. 25 and 26; Refer also to Aloysius Chin, *The Communist Party of Malaya: The inside story*, ch. 5 and 6.
19 Ibid., pp. 428–9, 434 and 455.
20 *Voice of Malayan revolution*, 27 June 1981, part 5.

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campfire in the jungle near the Thai border. The real struggle, he noted, became a 'political and economic one to convince all races that they had chosen a system that would enable them to live in prosperity and peace'.[21]

Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia on 31 August 1963. One of the principal objectives of the Federation of Malaysia was to check the communist threat in the predominantly Chinese-populated Singapore. In Singapore, the strongest opposition to the Federation idea was surprisingly, as Ambassador of the Federation of Malaya to the US Dato Ong Yoke Lim told President Kennedy, not the communists.[22] Instead, the chief threat to merger came from the pro-communist Barisan Sosialis Party (BSP) in Singapore. A number of BSP leaders were consequently arrested and imprisoned by Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. According to the US assessment, Lee 'could probably maintain his position by a combination of political acumen and an effective internal security apparatus'. The CPM leadership had indeed viewed Lee Kuan Yew's desire to join Malaysia 'as due in part to his perception of the advantages it provided him in moving against the CPM'. They believed that Lee would manoeuvre behind the Tungku and destroy the communists not only in Singapore but in Malaya as well. But, in the end, it was the Tungku who forced Lee's hand to launch 'Operation Cold Store' on 2 February 1963. The communists had anticipated such a move four years earlier, revisited the scenario in 1961, but failed to take any preemptive action. As Chin Peng noted, 'Operation Cold Store, shattered our underground network throughout the island. Those who escaped the police were into hiding. Many fled to Indonesia.'[23]

The strongest external opposition to merger came from Sukarno, backed particularly by the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), who launched a military confrontation against Malaysia.[24] In January 1965, Zhou Enlai had also condemned the formation of Malaysia and considered it 'a neo-colonialist plot'. Until 1970, Beijing did not recognise the independence of Singapore and continued to refer to Singapore 'as a part of Malaya',[25] which would explain Lee's apprehension of Beijing and his constant warning of the need to counter Chinese influence in the region. Tengku Abdul Rahman recalled:

> No one gained any satisfaction at all while the Confrontation was going on, no one except perhaps the Communist Party, both in Indonesia and Malaysia. Naturally they welcomed this dangerous situation as an opportunity to win political power in these two countries, and then finally to gain control of all politics throughout Southeast Asia. With this common dream of a 'Red Empire' of communism in the region,

21 Earl G. Drake, *A stubble-jumper in striped pants: Memoirs of a prairie diplomat* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 64.
22 Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, 24 July 1962, in *FRUS*, 1961–63, vol. 23, Southeast Asia, pp. 708–9.
23 Chin Peng, *My side of history*, pp. 436–9.
24 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE 54/59–62), Washington, 11 July 1962 and Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE 54/59–63), Washington, 20 Feb. 1963, in *FRUS*, 1961–63, vol. 23, pp. 707–8, 712–17.
25 Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore story: 1965–2000* (Singapore: Times Editions, 2000), pp. 636–7.

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a sense of strong understanding existed between the two Communist Parties, though their spheres of operations were divided.[26]

Attitude towards the war — the early years: 1965–1966

In Indochina, although the Americans had been involved in Vietnam as early as the 1950s in support of the French during the first Indochina war, there has never been an official date for the start of the second Indochina war, or the Vietnam war, as it is more commonly known. The Vietnamese communists viewed their war of resistance against the Americans as a continuation of their colonial struggle from 1945,[27] whereas on the American side, the landing of the first combat troops – two marine battalions consisting of 3,500 men – on the beach of Danang on 8 March 1965, is often considered to be the start of the Vietnam war. More marine units arrived in April that year. On 24 April 1965, President Johnson officially declared Vietnam a 'combat zone' for American forces. In early May, the 173rd Airborne Brigade became the first US Army combat unit to be deployed in South Vietnam. On 25 July 1965, President Johnson announced that the US would increase troop levels in South Vietnam to 125,000 men. At the end of July, the 101st Airborne Division moved into South Vietnam.

Singapore separated from the Federation and became independent on 9 August 1965; less than two years in the Federation of Malaysia. By that time, the second Indochina war was clearly underway. Not long after 9 August, US forces and the Vietnamese communists confronted each other in two major military campaigns — Operation Starlite (18–21 August 1965) and the well-known Ia Drang campaign (26 October–27 November 1965).

Singapore's minister for foreign affairs, S. Rajaratnam, addressed the issue of communism and the communist threat during the first session of the first Parliament on 16 December 1965.[28] According to the foreign minister, 'what is important is that the local Communists and the Barisan Sosialis should not be treated by outside countries as their special responsibility, where in fact it is a domestic problem for us to solve …'. The minister spoke about Singapore's policy of non-alignment which was essentially to ensure that Singapore 'do not become, or even appear to become, the pawn of any outside power', and in the process, 'jeopardizing our recently won independence'.

The foreign minister had earlier, on the occasion of Singapore's admission to the United Nations on 21 September 1965, explained his understanding of 'non-alignment' to the General Assembly:

> It simply means that we do not wish to be drawn into alliances dedicated to imposing our own way of life on other countries … However, this does not mean that

26 Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra, *Looking back: The historic years of Malaya and Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, 1977).

27 For an account of the role of Beijing and Moscow in the Vietnam war in the 1950s and 1960s, refer to Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam war from the other side: The Vietnamese Communists' perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).

28 Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore, vol. 24, Official Report, first session of the first Parliament, part I of first session (from 8 Dec. to 31 Dec. 1965).

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> Singapore equates non-alignment with indifference to basic issues of right and wrong or that it will evade taking a stand on matters, which it considers vital lest it displeases some member nations, including those with which it has close ties. Non-alignment is only in regard to narrow power bloc interests and not in regard to basic principles embodied in the U.N. Charter.[29]

Thus, Singapore would not join any 'international anti-communist crusade' and although the prime minister consistently emphasised the need to preserve the distinction between 'non-communist' and 'anti-communist', it is clear from past experiences of fighting the communists in domestic politics and from the foreign minister's first parliamentary speech that the ruling government was opposed to the communist ideology.

The late Michael Leifer noted that Singapore's identification as a non-aligned state was 'a *declaratory* attempt to avoid unnecessary provocation of Indonesia while confrontation (which only officially ended in August 1966, a year after Singapore's independence) was still in train [and] did not reflect its government's attitude to the outcome of the Vietnam War'[30] (emphasis added). While the Singapore leadership had misgivings about American involvement in Vietnam, it was equally concerned about the consequences of a premature and hasty US withdrawal. Lee had compared American policy in Vietnam with that of Britain's policy in Malaysia, which he considered as 'more enlightened'. The British, according to him, 'had the wisdom to see it was faced with an irresistible revolution – both Communist and nationalistic'. He felt that the United States was in an 'unenviable situation' and felt sorry for the Americans. But he also blamed them 'for not using the 11 years they have had',[31] referring to the years since the 1954 Geneva Conference. Lee Kuan Yew also disapproved of the way the Americans dealt with South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, describing it as 'unprincipled … backing him until he refused to do America's bidding, then looking the other way when Diem's generals assassinated him'.[32] He was also critical of the 'lack of flexibility' of the US, which accounted for the poor state of relations between Cambodia and the United States.[33] All said, Lee Kuan Yew was, on the whole, pessimistic about developments in South Vietnam, which he believed could have had a stable government 11 or even five years previously, although it did not look possible in 1965.[34]

Even though he felt that the Americans were 'heavy-handed and lacked a sense of history', Lee also believed that they 'meant well'.[35] Lee Kuan Yew believed in the validity of the domino theory, a belief he held consistently and never wavered from till today. He told an audience in Christchurch in March 1965 that 'if there is a general collapse of government defences in Vietnam, Malaysians are aware that they will be

29 *The little red dot: Reflections by Singapore's diplomats*, ed. Tommy Koh and Chang Li Lin (Singapore: World Scientific, 2005), p. 38.
30 Michael Leifer, 'The Vietnam war and the response of Southeast Asian countries', 30th Anniversary International Conference, Japan Association of International Relations, 4–8 Sept. 1986.
31 '"Pawns" in conflict', in *Wellington Dominion*, 12 Mar. 1965.
32 Lee, *From Third World to First*, pp. 502–3.
33 'If Vietnam collapses … Malaysia high on the Reds' list', in *Wellington Evening Post*, 15 Mar. 1965.
34 Ibid.
35 Lee, *From Third World to First*.

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"next on the list of the Communists" advance after Cambodia and Thailand have succumbed'. As we will see, he held this view throughout the duration of the Vietnam war. In May 1965, three months before Singapore's independence, Lee told a left-wing audience at the Asian Socialist Leaders' Conference in Bombay that:

> as Asians we must uphold the right of the Vietnamese people to self-determination … As democratic socialists we must insist that the South Vietnamese have the right not to be pressured through armed might and organized terror and finally overwhelmed by communism. So we must seek a formula that will first make it possible for South Vietnamese to recover their freedom of choice, which at the moment is limited to either communist capture or perpetual American military operations.[36]

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly in October 1965, the Singapore first Permanent Representative to the UN, Abu Bakar bin Pawanchee, pointed out that if the communists were allowed to take over South Vietnam, it would only be a matter of time before 'the same process of escalation by military and political techniques will overtake the neighbouring countries'.[37]

Singapore's attitude towards the United States had not always been positive. In a December 1964 report entitled, 'Singapore Government Officialdom and Attitudes towards the United States', John A. Lacey, the US Consul General, reported that:

> 'all of the senior Singapore officials speak Anglo-English. Their schooling has been under British rule, and their direct knowledge of the United States is practically non-existent. Their political history has been anti-colonialist, anti-capitalist, and by extension, anti-American. Their orientation is Afro-Asian, not Western, and the political environment in Singapore is fertile ground for anti-American barbs. Therefore, in their view, it would be politically unwise for the government leaders to associate too publicly with the United States or its representatives, or to identify themselves too closely with policies identifiable as being primarily American. Several of the Singapore officials told me as much'.[38] The consul-general, however, also added that the outlook of Singapore officials toward the United States appeared 'to be changing and growing somewhat warmer'. As one government minister told him, 'We are not so anti-American now. Now we can have back-room talk.'[39]

As we have noted above, Lee Kuan Yew himself viewed Americans, in his words, 'with mixed feelings'. He 'admired their can-do approach but shared the view of the British establishment of the time that the Americans were bright and brash, that they had enormous wealth but often misused it'. At the same time, he recognised that 'America was the only country with the strength and determination to stem this relentless tide of history and reverse the erosion of people's will to resist the communists.'[40]

36 Ibid., pp. 503–4.
37 Peter Boyce, *Malaysia and Singapore in international diplomacy: Documents and commentaries* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1968), p. 241.
38 Airgram from the American Consulate in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 21 Dec. 1964, RG 59, Box 2460, POL 15–1 Malaysia–US.
39 Ibid.
40 Lee, *From Third World to First*, pp. 500–1.

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If the Singapore side had much to learn about the United States, Washington too had much to learn about Singapore. The 1961 CIA bribery episode which was made public by Lee Kuan Yew in a televised news conference on 31 August 1965 had been recounted elsewhere and the full story need not be repeated here except for the ending when Washington offered US$1 million to the PAP for the release of the two CIA officers who were under detention. In his memoir, Lee Kuan Yew described the offer as 'an unbelievable insult'. 'The Americans', he noted 'had been buying and selling so many leaders in Vietnam and elsewhere that they believed they could buy and sell leaders everywhere.'[41]

Thus, for a combination of reasons, not least, as George Bogaars (Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence) explained, Singapore's need to be accepted and endorsed by the very significant and influential Afro-Asian group of countries (which were mostly anti-American), particularly prior to the UN vote on Singapore in September 1965, as well as the need to squelch the expected Barisan Sosialis efforts to exploit the base issue at home, Lee Kuan Yew went on over-drive to criticise the United States in its rhetoric and to make it incontrovertibly clear that the Singapore government was in full control of the bases and that the Americans would not be able to utilise them. But behind the scenes, the British deputy representative in Singapore revealed that Bogaars had earlier reaffirmed an informal understanding reached on 30 August 1965 that the Ministry of Defence would not interfere with existing British-US arrangements, specifically Operation 'Joss Stick', and in particular, US transportation of Vietnamese officers to Singapore for training in the Johore Jungle Warfare School.[42]

In the assessment of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE/54/59–65) of December 1965 on Singapore,[43] the pro-communist Barisan Sosialis Party (BSP) was the only large, well-organised and financed party in Singapore which could challenge the PAP if Lee Kuan Yew could not meet the basic economic and political needs of the citizens. Washington was however not overly concerned about the pro-communist BSP. On Lee Kuan Yew's belief that US strategic interest in Singapore placed him in a dominant position and that Washington 'could be brought to heel by hardnosed bargaining and threats of a Barisan take-over', Secretary of State Dean Rusk commented that 'Lee grossly overestimates strength of his bargaining position.'[44] As for Malaysia, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) had no serious political opponent although a strong pro-Chinese, pro-communist dissident movement with the potential to challenge the government existed in Sarawak. But that would only come about if the Commonwealth withdrew its troops there.

The NIE further observed that both Beijing and Moscow had so far not made any political capital out of the Singapore–Malaysia separation. It speculated that both the

41 Ibid., pp. 502–3.

42 Telegram from the American Consulate in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 1 Sept.1965, RG 59, Box 2653, POL Singapore-US.

43 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE 54/59–65), 'Prospects for Malaysia and Singapore', Washington, 16 Dec. 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–68, vol. 26, Indonesia; Malaysia–Singapore; Philippines (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2001).

44 Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Malaysia, Washington, 29 Jan. 1966, in *FRUS, 1964–68, vol. 26, Indonesia; Malaysia–Singapore; Philippines* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2001).

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Soviet Union and China regarded their relations with Indonesia to be more important than with Malaysia or Singapore. Furthermore, Beijing had yet to find an approach to Malaysia and would therefore likely focus on Singapore. Moscow, on the other hand, might have doubts about Singapore's viability as an independent country, but would most likely try to establish friendly relation with it to counter Chinese influence in the region.[45]

Last but not least, the December 1965 NIE noted that the mere possibility of an end to confrontation worried Lee Kuan Yew and his colleagues. They were concerned that in the long term, the Malays' fear of the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore would drive Malaysia and Indonesia closer together, to the detriment of Singapore. This worry also affected Singapore's response to the Vietnam war, 'with primary concern expressed that the United States should not abdicate the regional role appropriate for safeguarding the island-state's fragile independence'.[46] Lee's concern can be discerned from his meeting with William Bundy, then US Assistant Secretary for East Asia, in March 1966, when he asked Bundy about how the US would react to a communist-inspired communal conflict between Singapore and Malaysia. Lee emphasised that Washington should not view every Chinese as a communist or a potential communist.[47]

By 1966, Singapore–US relations had improved considerably. One concrete indicator was Lee Kuan Yew's request to meet with the newly appointed US ambassador to Singapore on 26 March 1966, the first time the prime minister had asked to see any US official since August 1965. The meeting was apparently friendly, with Lee expressing confidence that Washington would appreciate the political necessity for being responsive to Singapore's economic needs. After the meeting, Lee passed the word to the press, off the record, that he had asked to see the ambassador in a spirit of letting 'bygones be bygones' and to signal the opening of a 'new era in US-Singapore relations'.[48]

As for the Vietnam war, in February 1966, the Singapore government agreed to allow US military from Vietnam to come to Singapore for rest and recreation (R&R) on condition that the troops did not appear on the streets in their military uniform. The first R&R group of 74 men arrived on 31 March and departed on 5 April, without incident. A second group of 83 arrived on 7 April. On 3 July 1966, the Singapore government broke up a demonstration comprising the Barisan Sosialis Party (BSP), Partai Rakyat, Old Boys Association and pro-BSP trade union members when they attempted to stage a procession under the aegis of the 'Aid Vietnam against American Aggression Committee'. One of those arrested was Chia Thye Poh, a BSP Central Committee member and principal leader of the anti-American committee. Police action aside, the BSP failed to turn Vietnam into a local issue, much to the relief of the Singapore government. Instead, the government was able to turn the tables against the BSP by defending the importance of maintaining security and

45 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE 54/59–65), 'Prospects for Malaysia and Singapore', Washington, 16 Dec. 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–68, vol. 26, Indonesia; Malaysia-Singapore; Philippines (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2001).

46 Leifer, 'The Vietnam war and the response of Southeast Asian countries'.

47 Lee, *From Third World to First*, p. 504.

48 'Ambassador Bell meets with PM Lee', 3 Apr. 1966, RG 59, Box 2651, POL 2–1.

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public order and accusing the BSP of advocating chaos.[49] In the analysis of the US Embassy in Singapore, the left wing had been severely hampered in its efforts to exploit the Vietnam issue because of factionalism within the movement. Both the trade union leadership and the BSP appeared 'to have been more concerned with maneuvering for power within the left wing than they have been in developing an effective organized movement'.[50] The lack of support in Singapore for the left on Vietnam buoyed Lee's confidence that the political half (though not yet the economic half) of his battle for political survival had been won.

The left failed to exploit the Vietnam conflict to force the Singapore government to choose between China and the United States, and Lee was able to put the Vietnam issue in terms of Singapore's self-interest. In 'the most pro-American statement Lee has ever made in public', significantly in Singapore and before a student audience from the then University of Singapore on 15 June 1966, he agreed that the war was a crime against humanity but he did not believe that it was an American crime. He revealed that he had told opponents of US policy – Eastern European leaders – that they could not seriously regard Burma, Pakistan and India as American puppets, and these countries had not condemned Washington for committing crimes against humanity. In his words, 'the crime is that Vietnamese are dying by the hundreds every day, and the tragedy is that they are dying not for Vietnam but to ensure that what is happening in Vietnam is not repeated in the other countries of Southeast Asia'. He hoped that 'the United States, despite domestic criticism of US policy in Vietnam, would be able to hold the line through at least one more presidential election' (which was scheduled for 1968). He emphasised that the Southeast Asian countries should make the most of the time that was being bought for them.[51]

In a televised interview with reporters from the Malay language newspapers in August 1966, which US analysts described as 'the most explicit public statement he has made on Vietnam to date', Lee said that 'if American troops were withdrawn from South Vietnam it would not be the South Vietnamese people who would be determining their destiny, but armed terrorists'. He believed that the Vietnam issue could only be settled by negotiation but before that, the terrorists must be removed from South Vietnam following which American troops should withdraw. 'A government representing the people of South Vietnam should then be set up' to ascertain 'whether it wanted to merge with North Vietnam or not'.[52]

On 26 August 1966, the Singapore Parliament passed a Punishment for Vandalism Bill. In his speech in Parliament, Lee singled out those who 'went about shouting and carrying anti-American, anti-British, and pro-Vietcong slogans'. The government had also recently passed a law requiring newspapers to obtain government approval before publishing various types of 'security' information. The director for home affairs (then under the Ministry of Defence) explained to US embassy officers that the regulation was aimed at controlling left-wing efforts to exploit the Vietnam issue. The government wanted to prohibit the publication of any stories concerning the R & R programme, procurement in Singapore for Vietnam, US ship visits

49 'Police quell anti-American demonstration', 10 July 1966, RG 59, Box 2651, POL 2–1.
50 'Anti-American campaign', 1 May 1966, RG 59, Box 2651, POL 2–1.
51 'Vietnam policy', 19 June 1966, RG 59, Box 2651, POL 2–1.
52 'Lee defends US Vietnam actions', 27 Aug. 1966, RG 59, Box 2651, POL 2–1.

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or Singapore's policy toward the Vietnam conflict without prior approval of the government. According to the analysis of the US Embassy, the measures did not indicate that the government was threatened by growing anti-American sentiment. Rather, the virtual collapse of the 'Aid Vietnam against US Aggression' campaign 'had encouraged the government to bear down hard when the left wing appears to be at its weakest'.[53] The R & R programme was eventually discontinued in January 1970 when the US started withdrawing from Vietnam.

While supporting the US presence in South Vietnam, Lee was however concerned by some of the American military tactics which he feared might lead to an escalation of the conflict beyond Vietnam. For example, on 1 July 1966, after Washington stepped up the bombing of North Vietnamese oil storage areas around Hanoi and Haiphong, Lee in a speech on 4 July, 'the only official Singapore reaction' to the bombing, cautioned against miscalculating 'the tolerance of the Chinese Communist Party or, more importantly of the Russian Communist Party', which could 'trigger off a holocaust'. There was a point, Lee said 'beyond which they can no longer tolerate exposure as paper tigers or, worse, as betrayers of the communist cause'. The 4 July speech is also significant for the reactions to it. According to the US Embassy sources, several PAP members were surprised at Lee's mild reaction, 'since they felt that he could not afford to stand to the right of Prime Minister [Harold] Wilson'. One reporter was surprised how 'pro-American' Lee had become. The reporter who checked his story with the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) before filing it said he was told to drop from his lead paragraph a sentence which stated that Lee had warned the US about the dangers of escalation in Vietnam. The PMO said that the prime minister was not 'warning' the Americans but 'counselling them'.[54]

From the Singapore perspective, the American presence in Vietnam has to be seen in the context of another development, that is, British withdrawal from east of Suez, which in turn was critical to Lee's and his government's battle for survival after independence. A situation with both the British and the Americans withdrawing from the region would be disastrous. He told Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi that 'anyone who was not a communist and wanted to see the US leave Southeast Asia was a fool'. Lee stressed that while larger nations such as India and Japan might afford to indulge themselves in aloofness from the struggle, smaller Asian nations understood that should America withdraw from Southeast Asia, the Chinese would promptly fill the vacuum and that would be the end of their independence.[55]

Much has already been written on the British withdrawal and only the broad outline which is pertinent to this paper will be revisited here. Lee Kuan Yew explained the critical importance of the British military presence in his memoir, 'We badly needed the confidence British forces generated. If they were to leave suddenly before we had the capacity to defend ourselves, I did not think we could survive. Their presence gave people a sense of security, without which we could not get investments and be able to export our goods and services. That was the only way we could create enough jobs to

53 'GOS moves to control anti-US agitation', 3 Sept. 1969, RG 59, Box 2651, POL 2–1.
54 'Lee "counsels" US in Vietnam', 10 July 1966, RG 59, Box 2651, POL 2–1.
55 Telegram from the American Embassy in India to the Department of State, New Delhi, 12 Sept. 1966, RG 59, Box 2651 POL 7 Singapore.

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absorb our school leavers and prevent massive unemployment.'[56] A conversation with British Prime Minister Harold Wilson in January 1966 left Lee with the impression that the British would be withdrawing from Malaysia and Singapore, though the timing and the extent of the troop withdrawal remained unclear through 1966. But it was obvious that the British were unlikely to be able to maintain a military presence into the 1970s. Discussions in 1966 led Lee and his team to believe that the British would stay until at least 1971, after which they would maintain an amphibious force in the region. Lee recalled that under this arrangement, 'which he could not ask for more', he and his team felt confident that they could sort out their problems by the mid-1970s.[57] But London was forced to revise its time-line in 1967, which will be recounted later.

Singapore's analysis of the ongoing war in Vietnam can be deduced from its foreign minister's note of 22 August 1966 to the Thai government. In response to Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman's proposal for a Vietnam peace conference, S. Rajaratnam declined Singapore's participation for two reasons: (a) the proposal to have any chance of success would have to be initiated by countries not actively involved in Vietnam; and (b) the timing was not right as Hanoi had yet to be convinced that it could not win the war. In his analysis, the Vietnamese communists were unlikely to change position until after the US congressional elections in November 1966, which he believed 'Hanoi probably viewed as a test of US public support' for the Johnson administration's Vietnam policy. As such, he saw no viable alternative for the time being except to maintain the military pressure on North Vietnam.[58]

In the United States, the Republicans did make some gains in the mid-term elections but the Democrats managed to retain a majority in both the Senate and House of Representatives. By the end of 1966, there were nearly 360,000 American soldiers in the war. But despite all the American firepower and military activity, there was no sign that the Vietnamese communists were capitulating or considering capitulation. The American side also did not look as though it would be withdrawing from Vietnam any time in the near future. Neither side was thus winning the war. The Hanoi leadership predicted that 1967 would be a critical year.[59]

Growing doubts about the United States: 1967

By 1967, the general view was that the communist threat to Malaysia and Singapore stemmed from internal subversion rather than overt external aggression. Thus, the Vietnam communists did not pose a direct threat to Singapore. At the beginning of 1967, Goh Keng Swee, then Singapore's defence minister, listed three counter-measures to prevent the growth of communist power/communist political subversion before it developed into armed revolt, which in his view, should be implemented by Malaysia, Singapore and possibly Indonesia (in the event of a resurrection of the PKI, the Indonesian communist party). They included an efficient

56 Lee, *From Third World to First*, p. 47.
57 Ibid., p. 56.
58 'GOS rejects ASA peace initiative', 27 Aug. 1966, RG 59, Box 2651, POL 2–1.
59 *Lich Su Quan Doi Nhan Dan Vietnam Nam, Tap II – Quyen Mot* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1988), p. 358.

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secret police or 'Special Branch', proper treatment of social discontent, absorption of the country's intelligentsia in meaningful occupations and good government.[60]

One important aspect of the Vietnam war we need to consider is the evolution of US domestic opinion – public reaction to the Vietnam war and the anti-war movement in the United States – and its impact on the decision-making mechanism of the Johnson administration. It was a phenomenon that Lee Kuan Yew monitored very carefully. John Kenneth Galbraith recalled that the protest movement against the war 'was a brief candle which became incandescent in the years from 1966 until 1968 when Lyndon Johnson decided to withdraw himself from the Presidency and begin negotiations'.[61] The first phase was before 1966. Government officials and opinion-makers who opposed the war during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were predominantly liberal. In Garfinkle's assessment, the war would have escalated before 1965 if there had not been an effective opposition. The movement became increasingly radical in the second phase (between early 1966 and 1968–69).[62]

The period 1967 to mid-1968 is perhaps the time when the movement had its first great impact on actual decision-making and it is this period that we are concerned with here. It was also the period when the media, in reporting the war, increasingly began to doubt the validity of the Administration's statements. By mid-1967, White House officials were expressing, with new urgency, their unhappiness with the way the war was being covered on television. They blamed hostile or cynical reporters for the bleak news and distorted stories. Johnson was especially perturbed by reports that the war was at a stalemate, an assessment shared by many in the media, including Walter Cronkite at CBS.[63] This period also saw Johnson's popularity plummeting, which eventually led to his decision to withdraw from the presidential election in March 1968, which will be discussed later in this narrative. On the eve of his announcement that he was withdrawing from the presidential race, he said that no president could govern effectively when faced with opposition from the major news media.[64]

In Congress, there were a number of hearings in 1967 when even hawkish senators expressed doubts about the success of the war. That said, at the end of 1967, fewer than 30 senators and only 50 representatives actively opposed the war, which was not significant enough to have any impact on legislation. There were also contacts between the peace movement and Hanoi or the NLFSVN (the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam). In fact, from late 1966, the Vietnamese communists seemed to put greater effort into cultivating anti-war personalities (for example, A.J. Muste, Harrison Salisbury, David Dellinger, Dr Benjamin Spock and Tom Hayden) with

60 Goh Keng Swee (Minister of Defence, Singapore), Address given in Canberra to the Australian Institute of Political Science, 28 Jan. 1967, reprinted in Goh Keng Swee, *The economics of modernisation* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1972), pp. 188–205.

61 Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many reasons why* (London: Scolar Press, 1978), p. 162.

62 Adam Garfinkle, 'Aftermyths of the antiwar movement', in *Orbis*, Fall 1995, p. 507. Also refer to Adam Garfinkle, *Telltale hearts: The origins and impact of the Vietnam antiwar movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

63 Refer to Chester J. Pach, Jr., 'The war on television: TV news, the Johnson Administration and Vietnam', in *A companion to the Vietnam war*, ed. Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Limited, 2002), ch. 24.

64 Cited in Pach, Jr., 'The war on television', p. 464.

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the aim of influencing US domestic opinion and stimulating thoughts of compromise or, better still, withdrawal from the war. The year 1967 also saw greater Afro-American participation in the anti-war movement, as well as growing Afro-American radicalism in American cities, notably, Martin Luther King's first major speech on Vietnam, denouncing the war on 26 February 1967. On 24 April, he launched the 'Negotiations Now' movement; serious race riots took place in Newark, New Jersey and Detroit in July 1967. The Vietnam Week (8–15 April 1967) witnessed the first serious burning of the draft card. The radical intellectuals gained influence. Noam Chomsky, the most articulate of the radical pacifists continued to have a high, if not higher profile, and his writings were regularly published in *The New York Review of Books*. Amongst the liberal journals which shifted to the left, *The New York Review of Books* stood out 'in its militant assumption of radicalism' in 1967.[65]

Reading the above summary of the anti-war movement in 1967, it is reasonable to conclude that the activities must have affected Johnson's decision-making. Indeed, William Bundy recalled that, by 1967, Johnson was 'obsessed' with the public opposition to the war. The Johnson Administration expended much effort and energy during the year trying to counter the criticisms and opposition by producing reports of progress, that the enemy was being defeated and that there was light at the end of the tunnel. In trying to convince the public, the official reports were perhaps, at times, over-optimistic.[66] As George Herring put it, 'To stave off collapse of the home front, progress must be demonstrated in Vietnam; yet such progress might not be possible without clear signs of firm public support at home.'[67]

It is against the above backdrop that the concerns and remarks of Lee Kuan Yew must be understood. In an off-the-record talk at the Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London on 27 June 1967, Lee reiterated his now familiar line that if American power were withdrawn, there could only be a communist Chinese solution to Asia's problems. The British had already indicated they were withdrawing from the region, and neither Japan nor India was strong enough to play a greater role in Asian security. Lee thought that perhaps the United States could have cut losses when the Diem administration was faltering, and drawn the line in Thailand. He thought that the US had been unwise to allow the stakes in Vietnam to have risen so high. But having decided to fight in Vietnam and steadily increased its forces there to such massive proportions, Washington 'had to face the implications of its commitments'. He wondered whether with its kind of political system, the US would stay its course. Lee speculated that the level of warfare in Vietnam might be reduced. He had doubts of the efficacy of bombing North Vietnam. To Lee, the important thing 'was that North Vietnam could not be allowed to win'. As such, a 'holding operation' for an indefinite period – 10 to 20 years – 'might do the trick as far as the

65 Robert R. Tomes, *Apocalypse then: American intellectuals and the Vietnam war, 1954–1975* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 156.

66 Benjamin T. Harrison, 'Impact of public opposition on American foreign policy with Vietnam', in *Conflict*, 11, 1 (1991): 44–5, 51, footnote 14.

67 George Herring, '*Cold blood*': *LBJ's conduct of limited war in Vietnam*, USAFA Harmon Memorial Lecture 1990. Also refer to George Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A different kind of war* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), ch. 5.

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political requirements in Asia were concerned while allowing US to reduce military and other costs'. Lee believed it might not make much difference if South Vietnam were to go communist for 20 years or so 'for non-communist Asian states by then would be stronger'. On China, Lee did not attach much importance to the Chinese hydrogen bomb which he thought Beijing had already obtained, 'most of their political capital from the 1964 explosion and their progress since then brought only marginal prestige'.[68]

Not long after Lee's IISS talk, in July 1967, Whitehall published its Defence White Paper making it public knowledge that the British would reduce their forces in Southeast Asia by 50 per cent by 1970–71 and completely by the mid-1970s. But less than six months after the announcement, in January 1968, Lee was to learn that the British would pull out completely in 1971 and there would not even be an amphibious force left behind (as promised in 1966) after 1971.[69] US officials reported that as it became clear in 1967 and 1968 that Britain would withdraw its forces from Singapore, the Singapore leadership 'have increased their efforts to cement ties with Australia and New Zealand, the treaty connection which these countries have with the United States being very much in the mind of the GOS [Government of Singapore]' and that 'while Singaporeans have had very little knowledge of the US until recently, were inclined to distrust American intentions and doubt American performance and finesse, they have in the last two years begun to see that American offshore presence and regional support is necessary if the hard-won independence and relative security of Southeast Asian nations is to be preserved. Singapore is especially conscious of the fact that American encouragement and support is an essential ingredient if ANZAC forces are to continue to play a role in the defense of Singapore.'[70]

From 17 to 26 October 1967, Lee Kuan Yew went on his first official visit to the United States at the invitation of the US government. In a conversation with the Australian High Commissioner prior to his US trip, Lee made the following observations regarding Vietnam: (a) he doubted US resources would be sufficient to sustain both the war and the requirements of Johnson's Great Society; (b) he was worried the US would 'undertake dangerous escalation' in order to bring the war to a quick end; (c) he thought it was essential for the future security of Southeast Asia to avoid further military escalation but at the same time ensure a 'satisfactory' Vietnam settlement; (d) he would prefer Singapore to adopt a neutral position but if the war expanded, it 'would be impossible to avoid choosing sides'; and (e) it was essential for the US to reconcile to a 'tough, long and limited war', and for the US to publicly demonstrate its commitment to this proposition.[71]

In one of his pre-departure interviews, he clarified that he was not concerned about the day-to-day decisions on the Vietnam war but more importantly the 'shape of the final settlement which will have vital effect on all Southeast Asia,

68 Telegram from the American Embassy in the United Kingdom to the Department of State, London, 28 June 1967, RG 59, Box 2322, POL-7 Malaysia.

69 Lee, *From Third World to First*, p. 558.

70 Airgram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 29 Sept. 1967, RG 59, Box 2478, POL 7 Singapore.

71 Telegram from the American Embassy in London, to the Department of State, London, 16 Oct. 1967, RG 59, Box 2322, POL 7 Malaysia.

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including Singapore'. He wanted to see the US leave Vietnam 'in such circumstances that will leave all the other nation-groups in Asia fairly secure from having the kind of processes that have gone on in Vietnam'. Drawing on his own, in his words, 'limited experience with the communists', he concluded that the Vietnam war was a 'test of will', and therefore 'who has the strongest will and the most infinite of patience must triumph'. He believed that the communists had 'great patience and will'. As such, he did not think that 'quick solutions' – 'smacking everybody down into the mud or burning up the 17th parallel' – could win the war.[72]

Ambassador Galbraith's long report of Lee Kuan Yew's discussions during his visit further reveals Lee's reading/analysis of the Vietnam war situation.[73] Throughout the visit, Lee was concerned that whatever he had said would not make things difficult for President Johnson. The impression he left was that he wanted to be helpful to the president on Vietnam. Lee revealed that he had once corresponded regularly with Pham Van Dong but Dong now regarded him as a turncoat. Contacts between Singapore and Hanoi through their representatives based in Cambodia had since been few and far between, uneventful and unproductive. In Lee's assessment, it was unlikely that there could be talks or a settlement before the 1968 US presidential election. There was no reason for the Hanoi leadership to want to help Johnson win the election after he had bombed them into rubble.

Lee thought that military considerations were being allowed to override the political ones when it should be the other way around. He emphasised the need to find good South Vietnamese leaders who could provide 'firm political ground', which was a prerequisite for the military effort to be successful. He was also critical of certain practices of the US military in Vietnam, especially the bombing of whole villages before a shot had been fired at them, as well as the failure to retain the better and more politically sensitive middle-grade officers for a longer period. He also thought that the US military should have tried to hold west of the Mekong river where the guerrillas were Meo, Lao and Thai rather than Vietnamese.

Tactics aside, Lee argued that there were many points where the US could have disengaged and confined itself to providing military assistance to the Vietnamese but since it had chosen to make its stand in Vietnam, Washington 'cannot substitute another stand now without doing grave damage to its future position in Asia'. The Thais, which he described as 'the greatest anticipators of history', would bring in a new set of leaders who would 'take the first plane to Peking'. Lee did not doubt the American leaders whom he believed had the determination but he was not so sure about 'the will and staying power of the American people, a largely ethnically European people who may well feel that the center of gravity of the world will remain where it has been for the last 400 years – in the Atlantic'. In contrast, he speculated that the power centre in the twenty-first century would be around the Pacific basin, 'and the way the United States handles the Vietnam problem, and the way the American people elect their leaders in the 1968 elections, may well decide whether

72 Telegram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 30 Sept. 1967, RG 59, Box 2478, POL 7 Singapore.

73 See Memorandum for the Record by Ambassador Francis J. Galbraith for Mr Walt W. Rostow, The White House, 15 Nov. 1967, RG 59, Box 2479, POL 7 Singapore.

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the United States plays a part in the power equation in Asia, and whether the United States remains a leading world power, in the 21st Century'.

Lee believed that the US could win in Vietnam if it could convince Nguyen Van Thieu and his deputy, Nguyen Cao Ky, to 'allow the right leadership to emerge'. Citing Singapore as an example, he said that the communists were 'beaten by the ballot' in Malaysia/Singapore because there were five men who were willing to stake their lives and take on the communists. The British had made it possible for such men to emerge in Malaysia/Singapore because they realised that although they were making common cause with the communists 'to get rid of the British', they were not themselves communists. As a result, the British remained welcome.

Contrary to speculations that Lee's visit, coming so soon after the publication of the British Defence White Paper, was directly linked to the announcement of the British pullout from Singapore/Malaysia, Lee in fact did not believe that the US could replace the British physically in Singapore for political reasons. As such he did not seriously ask for any specific defence assistance or commitments for Singapore.[74] Lee apparently did try but failed to draw Secretary of State Dean Rusk 'into a statement of commitment, or of willingness to consider commitment, to Singapore as quid pro quo for more explicit Singapore support for the United States on Vietnam'. At his meeting with Dean Rusk on 17 October 1967, Lee told Rusk that he would not commit himself to the side of the United States unless and until he could be assured that Washington would stand firm in Asia. Lee wanted concrete assurance voicing his doubts that American 'eurocentrism' would make it 'unlikely that Washington would do what would be necessary to preserve a balance of power in favour of the free countries of Asia'.[75] He did, however, manage to catch the interest of Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defence, in Singapore's air and naval facilities, which the British would be vacating. While the US had no desire to assume a military commitment in Singapore, McNamara said he was prepared, without commitment, to examine the facilities and US requirements, and to try to match them.

Lee told Vice-President Humphrey that he was not seeking a specific commitment from the US for Singapore but warned that if Washington were to withdraw from Vietnam, 'there would be fighting in Thailand within one and half to two years, in Malaysia shortly thereafter, and within three years, I (Lee) would be hanging in the public square'. Lee asked whether the Americans considered Southeast Asia to be important. According to Lee, the centre of gravity had shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic to the Pacific. 'You are going to have to take sides. No one wants to be on the losing side. With you, we have a fighting chance. For me, it's survival.' Lee added that if the US wavered, he would have to make some contingency plans. He said the Thais 'who had a legendary reputation in Asia, for anticipating history and switching sides to end up on the winning side, would be the first to make other arrangements and reach some kind of accommodation with North Vietnam or China'.[76]

74 Telegram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 11 Dec. 1967, RG 59, Box 2479, POL 7 Singapore.

75 Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, 17 Oct.1967 in *FRUS*, 1964–68, vol. 27, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs (online version).

76 Memorandum from Vice-President Humphrey to President Johnson, Washington, 19 Oc.1967 in *FRUS*, 1964–68, vol. 27, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs (online version).

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Asked by McNamara for his assessment on how the indigenous countries were making use of the time which the US effort in Vietnam was affording them, Lee's view was that China, both Koreas, Formosa, both Vietnams, and possibly Thailand, were good bets but Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Indonesia and the Philippines, were considered poor risks. 'But if you give up in Vietnam I'm done', he said, repeating the point he made to Vice-President Humphrey. It is significant to bear in mind that Lee was especially concerned over the position of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, and related to that Singapore's position. He was very aware that he could not survive in a Chinese communist-dominated Southeast Asia. Lee hoped that the US would fit in some of its requirements to keep the repair and maintenance facilities going in Singapore post-British withdrawal. He stressed to Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy the importance of giving '"the people in Singapore and two or three million in Malaya" (obviously referring to the Chinese), an alternative to communism…' He was also worried that the US might side with the Indonesian and Malaysian Malays against their Chinese populations, giving Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur the idea that they could serve as 'a counterweight to China' and bolstering Indonesian domination in the region, a perennial concern which he also brought up at their meeting in Singapore in March 1966 and time and time again.[77]

It is worth noting that at this point in Lee's political career in 1967, he still needed to take cognisance of the left-wing elements among his electorate. Clark Clifford recalled a conversation with Lee at the White House dinner. Clark asked Lee whether Singapore might send troops. Lee's reply was that there was no possibility because of the adverse political effect that it would have in Singapore.[78] Indeed, Goh Keng Swee commented that Lee was in some trouble with his English- and Chinese-speaking followers over the impression which had gained currency, that he 'had gone too far in endorsing US position in Vietnam'. The people 'had gotten the impression that he had been "egging US on" in Vietnam rather than urging settlement'.[79] Lee's subsequent trips to Cambodia (2–8 December 1967), his meetings with the North Korean Charge d'Affaires, as well as the North Vietnam's representative and his disparaging remarks about US Asian allies, particularly South Korea, Philippines and Thailand in Phnom Penh, were all publicised to help refurbish his non-aligned image.

The impact of the Tet Offensive: 1968–1971

In early January 1968, George Bogaars (Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Interior and Defence), in a long conversation, described Singapore's security concerns. According to Bogaars, 'the main danger is a possible, indeed probable, expansion of the communist insurgency under Chin Peng in the Thai/Malaysia border area'. Singapore intelligence was convinced that in 1960–61, the CPM made a basic decision

77 See, for example, Memorandum of Conversation (Mr George Bogaars, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Interior and Defense, Mr Tay Seow Huah, Director, Intelligence Department, Mr Louis Sandine, Political Officer, Saigon and Mr E.L. Hickcox, Political Officer), 8 Jan. 1968, Singapore 1–256 Enclosure no. 1, RG 59, Box 1622, 7–Singapore–US

78 Clark M. Clifford, 'A Vietnam reappraisal: The personal history of one man's view and how it evolved', *Foreign Affairs*, 47, 4 (1969): 601–22.

79 Telegram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 28 Nov. 1967, RG 59, Box 2479, POL 7 Singapore.

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to replace its parliamentary struggle with a war of liberation along racial lines. There was recent evidence of the increasing activity of the communist guerrillas in places such as Penang and along the Thai border. If a racial or communal conflict broke out in Malaysia, 'the security implications of these developments for Singapore would stem from the probability of large numbers of Chinese refugees seeking sanctuary in Singapore and the likelihood that Singapore's Chinese would demand irresistibly that Singapore side actively with the beleaguered Chinese north of the causeway'.

In Singapore's analysis, Chin Peng and his group were not under the control of Beijing and the shift to a communal struggle strategy did not necessarily have Chinese approval. Singapore was not 'a priority political objective' for Beijing at this time but it has commercial utility for the Chinese. Beijing allowed Lee Siew Choh and the Barisan Sosialis to carry out their own programmes in Singapore but it was not seriously supporting their efforts to stir up disorder in the city-state because it hoped to maintain the status quo for the time being 'to make Singapore their major export outlet in place of Hong Kong, which within the next few years they expect to absorb'. Bogaars explained that 'in line with Beijing's policy of first capturing the "countryside" and surrounding the cities, they wanted to take "rural Malaya", after which Singapore, like Penang, Butterworth, Malacca and other cities, would fall into their lap'.[80]

Singapore was equally concerned about a potential threat from Indonesia. Although Singapore–Indonesia relations were described by Bogaars as 'excellent', the leadership could not be complacent about the future. Singapore was worried about the consequences if the Suharto regime failed — 'a foreign adventure a la Sukarno to divert public discontent or…. it might be replaced by another regime with an adventurism outlook'.[81] Besides the security aspect, there was the economic dimension as well. The impending British withdrawal had further created the impression that Singapore was vulnerable to attack which could affect the confidence of local and foreign businesses. As such, Singapore was looking towards the US to purchase military hardware to shore up its defence.

The Tet Offensive at the end of January 1968 aggravated Singapore's security concerns. One of the most important public statements about US strategy in Vietnam, relating it with remarkable candour to America's global difficulties, was Johnson's address of 31 March 1968 in which he simultaneously announced Washington's willingness to enter into peace talks with Hanoi and his decision not to run in the forthcoming presidential election scheduled at the end of the year.

As Robert M. Collins showed in his study, 'the decision to halt the escalation of the war was as much economic as it was political or military'.[82] Johnson indicated the close relationship between the ability to deploy more American troops to Vietnam and the gravity of the United States economic and financial difficulties. The cost of the war was now weighing heavily on the US budget, leading to a deficit which could only be remedied by a tax surcharge — a measure strongly opposed by

80 Memorandum of Conversation (Mr George Bogaars, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Interior and Defense, Mr Tay Seow Huah, Director, John B. Dexter, Deputy Chief of Mission, American Embassy Singapore), 12 Jan. 1968, Singapore 1–256 Enclosure No. 2, RG 59, Box 1622, 7–Singapore–US

81 Ibid.

82 Robert M. Collins, 'The economic crisis of 1968 and the waning of the "American century"', in *American Historical Review*, 101, 2 (1996): 396–422, 417.

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Congress. In the absence of a reduction of the deficit, and in a situation where the American balance of payments was also in trouble, any decision to increase troop levels in Vietnam, as requested by Westmoreland, would have disastrous consequences for the global position of the United States. Johnson had no choice but to limit further troop commitment to a level of 13,500 instead of the 206,000 requested. It meant, too, an end to the search-and-destroy strategy in Vietnam, a strategy which Lee had never supported, preferring a strategy of holding operations in the delta region instead.[83]

This is perhaps the appropriate juncture to introduce the psychological dimension of the domino theory. The domino theory has a reputation and psychological demonstration effect which is often overlooked in discussions of America and the Vietnam war. As John Lewis Gaddis[84] noted, 'Eisenhower and his advisers attached great importance to appearances; perceptions of power' which they believed 'could be as important as power itself'. 'Victories even for independent communism could create the impression of a United States in retreat; the resulting loss in morale and will to resist could be devastating', he added. The credibility of the US as a bulwark against communist expansion was never so severely tested as in the period after Tet 1968. Speaking to the *New York Times Magazine*, Lee said, 'if, having put the stakes up so high, South Vietnam is abandoned, then I think the neighbouring countries, the countries adjacent to Vietnam, will find American will to stay and hold the line not credible, and everybody will shift in posture'. Vietnam, according to him, had acquired 'great symbolic importance' because the United States had chosen to draw the line there against further communist expansion, and to withdraw would have 'a *tremendous psychological impact* on the Thais, the Cambodians, the Laotians, the Australians, the New Zealanders, the Filipinos and everybody else'[85] (emphasis added). In his memoir, Charles T. Cross, who was US ambassador to Singapore (from 1969 to 1971), recalled his many talks with Lee Kuan Yew. Lee, he noted, put his strongest emphasis on the psychological factors when discussing US policies in the region and presented a 'reasoned, hard-nosed, undisguisedly self-centered argument for the critical importance to Southeast Asia of the United States handling correctly its withdrawal from Vietnam'. In Lee's view, if the United States were to leave in a manner which would cause a loss of morale, the South Vietnamese regime would collapse. Thailand and then Malaysia would follow. On the other hand, if the American withdrawal were carried out in a way that would not cause the South Vietnamese to lose confidence, then 'the other dominos would be enheartened'.[86]

83 Telegram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 15 May 1968, RG 59, Box 2479, POL 7 Singapore.

84 John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of containment: A critical appraisal of postwar American National Security policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 144; See also, Noam Chomsky's view of the domino theory which he described as 'a rational version … which has never been abandoned because it's correct', in Kevin Hewison, 'Noam Chomsky on Indochina and Iraq: An interview', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 37, 4 (2007): 6–7.

85 *New York Times Magazine*, 28 Apr. 1968, p. 79 and following, cited in Robert J. McMahon, *The limits of empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 153. See also p. 152 for Thai and Filipino reactions.

86 Charles T. Cross, *Born a foreigner: A memoir of the American presence in Asia* (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), pp. 209–10; See also, for example, Airgram from the

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After more than a month of haggling over the venue for the talks, the first substantive meeting between the US and the North Vietnamese side finally took place on 13 May 1968 in Paris. Lee was pessimistic about the negotiations and viewed the negotiations as 'dangerous' because it cast doubt on US staying power in Vietnam. Furthermore, he believed that Hanoi would use the negotiations to influence the forthcoming presidential election by making the gap between the US position and theirs actually closer prior to the elections, thus favouring the presidential candidate that offered the most concessions, but once the election was over, 'the real and much greater gap would develop'. He was of the view that Johnson's position had been undermined by talks of military victory prior to the Tet Offensive.[87]

There was a lot of uncertainty in the immediate post-Tet period. In Lee Kuan Yew's words, it was 'a period of intense probings all round'.[88] Of particular concern to Lee was the Australian and New Zealand reaction to a US withdrawal from Southeast Asia. He thought that Canberra and Wellington would also back out. With regards to the peace talks, in Lee's analysis, Hanoi wanted an American withdrawal and thereafter an arrangement whereby the Vietnamese would be allowed to settle their own affairs. There was no advantage whatsoever for the North Vietnamese leadership in giving Johnson a settlement in Vietnam. But following Johnson's 31 March announcement, Hanoi could not refuse to talk to the Americans but he did not think Hanoi had any immediate interest in a settlement. Ho Chi Minh 'would sit and wait for a peace candidate to emerge from the elections'.[89] Lee also believed that Hanoi was relying more heavily on the advice of Moscow than Beijing.

China was in the midst of the Cultural Revolution. According to Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam, 'at the moment, China neither wants nor is able to launch a military attack against Southeast Asia; its internal political problems are too great. If China were capable of launching military aggression and had the will to do so, then in that case the Southeast Asian countries would not be able to protect themselves alone.' Another danger with respect to communism was that of 'infiltration and subversion'. 'Only modern social policies and rapid economic development can banish the danger of Communism.' In his analysis, the consequences would be 'minor' if South Vietnam was absorbed into the communist bloc peacefully but if it were through violent means, the 'domino theory would come into play'.[90]

During Lee Kuan Yew's five-week sabbatical in the United States in November to December 1968, he observed that President Nixon's options were extremely limited by the sensitivity of the American electorate to casualty figures. He concluded that the

Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 8 Apr. 1970, RG 59, Box 2590, POL 7 Singapore.

87 Telegram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 15 May 1968, RG 59, Box 2479, POL 7 Singapore.

88 Foreign Office record of an interview between Mr Stewart and Lee Kuan Yew, 27 May 1968, FCO 15/150, Number 22 in *British documents on the end of empire series A, volume 5: East of Suez and the Commonwealth 1964–1971, Part 1: East of Suez*, ed. S.R. Ashton and Wm. Roger Louis (London: TSO, 2004), p. 373.

89 Ibid.

90 Airgram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 29 May 1968, RG 59, Box 2480, POL 15–1 Singapore.

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US did not have the necessary resolve to carry through the Vietnam war to a victorious finish. He was convinced that the Nixon administration would settle for a compromise which would most likely result in the eventual communist domination of Vietnam. While he accepted the inevitability of a reduction of American forces in Vietnam, in his many meetings in the US, he argued that it would be disastrous to carry out a precipitate programme of reducing the American presence and leaving everything to the South Vietnamese. It should make it clear to Hanoi that the US was willing to leave its army in Vietnam 'forever if necessary' and he even suggested a mercenary army. Only then would North Vietnam be ready to talk peace.[91] In his words, 'If Vietnam goes, all this (referring to the accomplishments his government had made developing Singapore) goes too.'[92]

Lee Kuan Yew emphasised to Henry Kissinger when they met on 13 December that if Thailand, the linchpin in Southeast Asia, fell to the communists, all of the area would be in serious trouble. The Nixon administration, no matter what else it did in the region, must leave the Thais in a psychologically secure state of mind.[93] He hoped that with US backing, the Thais would stand firm and that a new sturdy first line of defence would be constructed along the Mekong. He was, however, privately doubtful as to whether the Thais had the necessary backbone and competence to fulfil this task.[94] In fact, Lee was pessimistic about the viability and stability of both Indonesia and Malaysia in the next ten years, a view he shared with Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1971.[95] US Embassy officials in Singapore noted that Lee was more pessimistic than some of his other colleagues about the Thais as well as the Malaysian's ability to resist the communists.[96]

He also told Kissinger that if the United States had to disengage from the war, it should do so only after allowing a national leadership to emerge in South Vietnam. But as long as the US was tied to an Air Marshall and a General (referring to Ky and Thieu), it was in trouble because in his view it was impossible to be a general and a politician at the same time. But he cautioned against ousting the present leadership. Washington, he advised, should agree with Hanoi on withdrawal terms which would give the South Vietnamese a chance to develop their own leadership, elect a government which could be supported by the many non-communist patriots who had been driven into the National Liberation Front. This could only be achieved in stages. Therefore, as US troops withdrew, some sort of international control group should be there to fill the vacuum. The objective was to ensure an environment in which a popular election could be held without terror and intimidation. Lee believed

91 Telegram from the Department of State to American Embassy in Djakarta, Washington D.C., 20 Mar. 1969, RG 59, Box 2479, POL 7 Singapore.

92 Telegram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 14 Apr. 1969, National Security Council Files, VIP Visits, Box 938.

93 Memorandum of Conversation, 19 Dec. 1968, Digital National Security Archive (DNSA), US Policy in the Vietnam war, 1954–1968, VI02363.

94 Airgram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 10 Jan. 1969, RG 59, Box 2479, POL 15 Singapore.

95 Airgram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 29 Apr. 1971, RG 59, Box 2376, POL INDON-UK.

96 Airgram from the Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 8 Apr. 1970, RG 59, Box 2590, POL 7 Singapore.

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that the outcome would be a victory for the anti-communist forces. Washington must create conditions that would demonstrate to the non-communists in South Vietnam that this was their last chance to put together a government not dominated by Hanoi.

In summary, Lee's preferred end-game looked like this: before the mid-term congressional elections, US troop strength should be reduced by between one-half and two-thirds; at the end of four years, troops should be reduced to zero; and as the US withdrew, an international force must move in to prevent communist terrorism. His advice to the Paris delegation was to negotiate a staged withdrawal as described. The minimum would be two years between withdrawal and elections in South Vietnam (although he would prefer a three-year interregnum). He speculated that Hanoi might be pushed into accepting such an agreement. Any earlier than two years, and South Vietnamese confidence would be so shaken that elections would not be a true test. At the end of the conversation, he told Kissinger, 'If you want my help, for whatever it is worth, you can always call on me.'[97]

One of the indirect outcomes of the Tet Offensive was its impact on Singapore's relations with the communist bloc countries. Up till 1968, there was no communist diplomatic representation in Singapore despite its claim to be non-aligned. But in June 1968, Singapore and the USSR established diplomatic relations and the Soviets were permitted to establish an embassy in Singapore in January 1969. This was followed by most of the east European communist governments as well as Outer Mongolia, the only Asian communist power with which Singapore had agreed to establish diplomatic relations. North Korea had a consulate-general in Singapore. However, China was still kept at arms length. To Lee, much of Singapore's population still looked on China as its homeland and he was determined to deny Beijing access to this 'potentially subversive force'.[98] Lee strongly believed that a communist victory in Vietnam would certainly be followed by an increase in externally supplied and directed insurrections in other Southeast Asian countries and a concomitant decline in the will of the non-communist governments to resist, eventually bringing the communists to Singapore's doorstep, and only the US continued presence in Asia could prevent this. This led him to make another (unofficial) visit to Washington in May 1969 as well as in the fall of 1970 where he tried to get Washington's assurance that the US Navy would utilise Singapore's naval repair and maintenance facilities by threatening to offer the facilities to the Soviets.

In his conversation with the new President, Nixon, on 12 May 1969,[99] he reiterated the disastrous consequences if the US pulled out of Vietnam unilaterally. Lee identified two key aspects in US Vietnam policy in 1969. One was the issue of confidence in US pledges. The Thais, he argued, had put their future on the line and were now fearful the US would pull out. The important element of a Vietnam solution was that it must leave Thailand with a sense of confidence. He again spoke of Thailand as the key. If the US withdrew, Thailand will overreact and fall. In his estimation, within five years, Malaysia and Singapore would be lost and Indonesia would

97 Memorandum of Conversation, 19 Dec. 1968, Digital National Security Archive (DNSA), US Policy in the Vietnam war, 1954–1968, VI02363.

98 Airgram from the Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 8 Apr. 1970, RG 59, Box 2590, POL 7 Singapore.

99 Memorandum of Conversation, 12 May 1969, RG 59, Box 2479, POL 7 Singapore.

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also fall to the communist party. The other was to ensure that the Saigon administration would consolidate its hold over South Vietnam. He drew a parallel with Malaya during the 1950s and Vietnam in 1969. He explained that British tactics were not to search and destroy but to hold the population and permit the Tunku and himself to take power and rally the local forces against the communist forces. In Lee's view, the withdrawal of US forces might not be such a bad move if it would make it more tolerable for the US to remain in Vietnam for an extended period. As such, it might be useful to pull out 50,000 to 100,000 troops from Vietnam in 1969 as long as this move did not adversely affect the Saigon administration's control over the South Vietnamese population or rice production. He stressed the need to develop in the South Vietnamese the will to fight and urged that the US push the Vietnamese to carry the fight themselves and in particular the need to undertake necessary reforms. South Vietnam needed a few men of integrity to run the country, and 'never touch the till'. In his assessment, Nguyen Van Thieu might be able to rally people around him. But the US must remain in Vietnam until the government had confidence in its own capabilities and a 'spirit of success' took hold. He was, however, rather critical of Nguyen Cao Ky and contrasted Ky with himself.

Nixon concurred with Lee Kuan Yew's comments and observations, and assured him that Washington would hold the line in Vietnam and would make 'reasonable proposals for peace but never agree to a disguised defeat'. Both Nixon and Lee agreed on the adverse consequence of a US withdrawal on the non-communist world, particularly a loss of confidence in the US, its impact on Japan and as a catalyst for the hardliners in both Moscow and Beijing to push their policies of confrontation.

The general sense that the new US administration wanted to get out of the war as quickly as possible, the reluctance of Canberra to take a firm role in the proposed Five Power Defence Arrangement, the May 1969 racial riots in Malaysia and the Guam Doctrine (25 July 1969) all heightened the uncertainties since the Tet Offensive. However, by mid-1969, it looked less and less likely that the Nixon administration would succeed in achieving a satisfactory negotiated end to the war, and that the fighting would continue.

In his report of his visit to Singapore in January 1970, Vice-President Agnew noted that Lee 'was most interested in the Vietnam situation to the extent that it preempted his total conversation'. Lee was particularly concerned with the impact of American public opinion and had grave reservations over American media reports, and thought that the war 'would be won or lost in the United States by the capture or loss of American public opinion'. In Lee's assessment, the communists 'held the cards as to timing and degree' and as such, it would be prudent not to announce any specific figures of troop level withdrawals or time schedules for disengaging from Vietnam.[100]

The war eventually expanded into Cambodia in a substantial way after Sihanouk was ousted by the pro-US Lon Nol in March 1970. Space does not allow for a more detailed analysis of Singapore's attitude towards the Cambodian crisis in this paper

100 Memorandum for the President, Washington, 21 Jan. 1970, National Security Council Files, VP trip to East Asia, Box 450.

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except to note that Lee supported Nixon's response to the Cambodian situation but reckoned that Washington could have acted more nimbly rather than react to Beijing's moves. He was of the view that Cambodia would eventually be swallowed up by North Vietnam, South Vietnam and Thailand. 'The Khmer nation is "kaput"', he declared flatly on two occasions. He also noted that Bangkok was beginning to adjust to its traditional position of non-alignment and playing off the greater powers against each other for Thailand's survival.[101] By the end of 1970, Lee estimated that the US 'had a 55 % chance of getting out of Vietnam in such a way as to leave a government there was a chance of survival'.[102]

This is a perhaps a good place to pause and review Singapore's economic health since independence in 1965. According to Lee, in 1968, Singapore had nearly 'collapsed' economically. Things were far better in 1970 and he believed that in another five years, Singapore would be 'on its way'. The country was already no longer considered a less developed country (LDC). There is a popular belief that the Singapore economy benefited from the Vietnam war although there has never been any strong evidence to support this view. A 1970 study by one of Singapore most well-known and respected economists, Lim Chong Yah, concluded that the impact of the Vietnam war in terms of contributions to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had been relatively insignificant and, as such, there was little cause for alarm if the US withdrew from the war. In fact, the study noted that even in the extreme scenario of a complete cessation of trade with South Vietnam after the end of the war, the adverse economic effect would be far less serious than that of the British military withdrawal or the cessation of trade with Indonesia during the Konfrontasi [Confrontation].[103] In 1972, Singapore's per capita GNP was US$1,321 and the country was riding high on a wave of economic prosperity with an average growth rate of 13 to15 per cent over the previous five years. The PAP led by Lee won a landslide victory in the September 1972 general election.

Attitudes towards Sino-US rapprochement and the Paris peace negotiations: 1972–1974

The Sino-US rapprochement marked by President Nixon's visit to China from 21 to 28 February 1972 is one of the key events in the Vietnam war, indeed of the Cold War. The visit caught the world by surprise. To Lee, the rapprochement could not 'be faulted except for the surprise element'. If it could have been accomplished with less shock and surprise, the otherwise very favourable results would have been even better; US–PRC policy was correct, and 'the situation had to be faced, and this is the time'.[104] But at the same time, he remained concerned about the vulnerability of Singapore's predominantly Chinese population to the influence of Beijing. He privately expressed

101 Memorandum from Marshall Green (Assistant Secretary of State) to Henry Kissinger, Washington, 4 Nov. 1970, RG 59, Box 2590, POL 7 Singapore.

102 Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, 5 Nov. 1970, RG 59, Box 2590, POL 7 Singapore.

103 For statistics and other details, refer to Lim Ching Yah and Ow Chwee Huay, 'The Singapore economy and the Vietnam war', in *The Singapore economy*, ed. You Poh Seng and Lim Chong Yah (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press Sdn. Bhd., 1971), ch. 15.

104 Letter from Lee Kuan Yew to President Nixon, 23 Apr. 1973, National Security Council Files, VIP Visits, Box 938.

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concern that the rapid pace of developing US–PRC relations might put pressure on Singapore to recognise Beijing sooner than Lee wanted. Fortunately for Lee, as it turned out, US–China relations did not develop as anticipated.[105]

Lee's conversation with Jiang Jieshi during an unpublicised visit to Taipei (in mid-May 1973) provides us with a further glimpse of the PRC in Lee's worldview. In his analysis, there were three important and prosperous East Asian island positions, namely Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan (which he described as 'a tripod'), essential to the well-being of their citizens and to the prevention of the disastrous expansion of PRC influence over Southeast Asia. US policy and attitude towards the PRC as interpreted by the Southeast Asian countries would have an important bearing on their posture towards the PRC, and on the tenability of these island positions. He told Chiang that the Southeast Asian countries were consulting closely as to their policy in regard to relations with the PRC. In his view, it was important to coordinate and not move precipitately towards recognition. He was unhappy with Kuala Lumpur's move towards the PRC which he felt was 'rapid without coordination or safeguards'. He hoped that Jakarta, Manila and Bangkok would show proper circumspection and deliberation. Singapore would be the last Southeast Asian country to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing.[106]

Lee followed the Paris peace talks closely. He told Kissinger that he was terrified that Hanoi would accept the May 1971 offer of a ceasefire followed by an American withdrawal in four months. Kissinger confessed that if Hanoi had accepted, 'it would have put us in very difficult circumstances'.[107] Lee agreed with Nixon's handling of the Vietnam situation, including the intensification of bombing of the north. In his assessment, it was the only way to keep Hanoi in check and to pressure them to accept reasonable ceasefire terms. The bombing would also reduce North Vietnam's capacity to sustain military operations in the south after the ceasefire. Asked what he thought about the bombing in December 1972 (the Christmas bombings) which Nixon said was 'the toughest decision' he had had to make during the war, Lee said he thought it would lead to peace at the end of January 1973. The problem afterwards was how to maintain the peace.

The Paris peace agreement was signed on 27 January 1973. Lee believed that the US had achieved peace with honour in Vietnam. In his words, 'you disengaged from Vietnam in an honourable way. Whether there is peace in Vietnam is another matter.' He judged that the US got the best possible deal under the circumstances to disengage American forces. Lee was also convinced that US would continue to maintain a presence in the region.[108] Thus, a more confident Lee could say that 'if South Vietnam were to go communist in the immediate future, it does not necessarily follow that Thailand and the other countries in SEA would go communist, because the mood

105 Telegram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 19 Jan. 1973, RG 50, Box 2591, POL Singapore.
106 Telegram from the American Embassy in Taiwan to the Department of State, Taipei, 7 June 1973, RG 59, Box 2591, POL 7 Singapore.
107 Memorandum of Conversation, 10 Apr. 1973, National Security Council Files, VIP visits, Box 938.
108 Memorandum of Conversation, Department of State, 6 Apr. 1973, National Security Council Files, VIP visits, Box 938.

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today is very different from the mood in 1954 after Dien Bien Phu, when everybody believed it was invincible, the communist movement, the wave of the future'.[109]

Lee suggested to Kissinger that if the North Vietnamese were to attack Thailand, it would be sufficient for the US to launch a barrage against them by the 7th Fleet. But before that Washington must ensure that there were no POWs in the north. '500–520 have caused you great political difficulty … Send your bombers over the South. In the South, even if you get shot down, you can bail out in pretty safe territory', Lee said. Kissinger estimated that the North Vietnamese would not be in a position for a massive attack until January 1974. In Lee's assessment, if Hanoi believed that the US was prepared to resume bombing, it would be a deterrent. Anything less than a massive attack would not crack South Vietnamese morale and that is an important element.[110]

Both Lee and Kissinger were uncertain which way Hanoi would swing with regard to Moscow and Beijing. In Lee's words, it depended on 'which faction carries the lead'. But Lee was confident that for the next few years, Beijing would respond positively to Washington as the Chinese believed that Southeast Asia would lean towards Moscow. 'They want to keep it in a fluid situation. They want room to maneuver…', Lee explained.

On 1 August 1973, Singapore announced that it had established diplomatic relations with both Hanoi and Saigon at the ambassadorial level. But there was no immediate plan for resident missions. Saigon already had a consulate general in Singapore while Hanoi had a trade office. In Lee's words, 'I have to hedge … I recognize Hanoi, and recognize Saigon.'[111]

Singapore also offered to help the Saigon government in a 'demonstration project' to show the South Vietnamese what can be done in an urban situation to consolidate the political ground. Lee believed that Singapore had some experience of countering the communists in such situations which might be relevant in this new phase of political contest in Vietnam. An improvement in the outlook for Indochina 'would have a multiplier effect, beneficial to non-communist Asia, and the free world'.[112] Lee was even prepared to do it for free. In early May 1973, Saigon's Minister of Economy, Pham Kim Nguoc, paid a three-day unofficial visit to Singapore to look at Singapore's low cost housing programme/satellite town scheme. Lee asked Washington for assistance in arranging a suitable date for Thieu's visit to Singapore. Kissinger suggested to Thieu's chief adviser and Information Minister, Huong Duc Nha, that Thieu visit Singapore.

Developments in Cambodia in fact looked very much more ominous than in Vietnam in 1973. Lee described Phnom Penh as having 'a crippled government'. In Singapore's analysis, Vietnam was more important. As Foreign Minister Rajaratnam explained, 'Cambodia by itself is not the great problem. How the Lon Nol government transforms itself or whether Sihanouk was to return would not

109 Outgoing Telegram from the Department of State, 23 Apr. 1973, National Security Council Files, VIP visits, Box 938.
110 Memorandum of Conversation, 10 Apr.1973, National Security Council Files, VIP visits, Box 938.
111 Memorandum of Conversation, 4 Aug. 1973, Box 10, National Security Adviser, Saigon Embassy/Graham Martin Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
112 Letter from Lee Kuan Yew to President Nixon, 23 Apr. 1973, National Security Council Files, VIP Visits, Box 938.

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make much difference. If the Lon Nol government collapses, with a military victory for the Khmer Rouge, that would be very bad indeed.' In Lee's analysis, if Cambodia fell, South Vietnam still stood a chance of five or six years, through 1976. But he was concerned about the repercussion on the Thai situation which he described as 'tricky'. 'If Cambodia goes', he told Kissinger, 'I wouldn't give Thanom and Phaphat more than 18 months before they go and pack their belongings.'[113] Rajaratnam concurred that it was important to protect Thailand. In his view, 'It is your presence that is important. The numbers don't matter.'[114]

Kissinger had great respect for Lee's views and consulted Lee on how to bring the Cambodian conflict to an early compromise settlement. Lee believed that only Sihanouk could salvage the situation and must be persuaded to return to Phnom Penh and Lon Nol must go into exile. He initially suggested that Rajaratnam who was visiting Beijing on 12 March 1975 carry a personal letter from Lee (who had a friendly relationship with the Prince) to gauge his reaction. Lee felt certain that Sihanouk was still anti-communist although the coalition government he cobbled together inevitably had some communist elements. But subsequently, Lee had a re-think.[115] In his reply to Kissinger on 26 February 1975, his advice was that the US must help the Lon Nol government to break the supply routes of the Khmer Rouge. If that could be achieved, the Khmer Rouge might then be made to believe that they faced the prospect of a protracted and costly conflict. But if the impression created was that it was only a matter of time before the Phnom Penh government disintegrated, Sihanouk and Khieu Samphan would not settle for less. In Lee's view, the best case scenario was for a Laotian-type settlement or coalition. He omitted any mention of delivering a personal letter to Sihanouk in Beijing because, in his words, 'now is not the time for overtures or negotiations'. He suggested sending Senator Mansfield to meet Sihanouk as soon as possible. But before that could be done, Phnom Penh fell on 16 April 1975. Soon after, Saigon fell on 30 April bringing the Vietnam war to an end.[116]

The Vietnam war ends: 1975

The fall of Saigon was a watershed in the international politics of Southeast Asia. Lee fully concurred with Kissinger that if Washington had kept the right to bomb and there had been no Watergate, the North Vietnamese communists would not have launched their military offensive. As Lee put it, 'there was no inevitability it (Saigon) would fall'. In Lee's analysis, the loss of South Vietnam was because Watergate tested American credibility; then the Americans cut down supplies to the south. This in turn, led to rationing of shells and that had a cumulative effect.

113 Memorandum of Conversation, 4 Aug. 1973, Box 10, National Security Adviser, Saigon Embassy/Graham Martin Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
114 Memorandum of Conversation, New York, 5 Oct,1973, RG 59, Box 2463, POL 7 Malaysia.
115 Telegram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 24 Feb. 1975, 'Country File', Box 16, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, 1974–1977, Gerald R. Ford Library.
116 Telegram from the American Embassy in Singapore to the Department of State, Singapore, 26 Feb. 1975, 'Country File', Box 16, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, 1974–1977, Gerald R. Ford Library.

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Thieu's decision to withdraw broke the will. In Lee's words, 'he must have been out of his mind to give that order'.[117]

Shortly after the fall, Lee met President Gerald Ford on 8 May. This meeting, according to Kissinger 'was the best he's *(Ford)* had since he's been in office, and I am not saying that to flatter you'. Ford asked Lee for his frank and unvarnished views of the situation and what the US should do.[118] Lee revealed that his immediate reaction to the fall of Saigon was 'one of astonishment and alarm at the rapidity with which the situation fell apart'. He informed the President that the Thais were accusing the US of having no morals, the Malaysians were frightened, Marcos was reacting to the mass media but the good thing was that the Indonesians were 'digging their toes in'. The ASEAN countries were all doing a reassessment of the implication of the fall.

Looking towards the foreseeable future, Lee was of the view that Hanoi might see this military success as a moment of destiny and might want a master-servant situation with Cambodia and Laos and also exert pressure on the Thais. While Bangkok was not in immediate danger, there was the urgent need to 'calm the Thais down'. He noted that Vietnam had a well-trained and well-equipped, million-man army. Lee revealed that he had spoken to both Kukrit and Chatchai. Laos, on the hand, was 'a goner'. As for Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge would never have succeeded had Sihanouk not swung Cambodia to them. Lee opined that Sihanouk should have returned to Phnom Penh or stayed in Paris. Cambodia would be the arena of a struggle between Beijing and Hanoi. Beijing would do its best to see that Hanoi did not control Cambodia. Moscow would support Hanoi. Referring to Vietnam, Lee said, 'This is an Asian Yugoslavia. It's Albania in reverse. The Soviet Union is backing the Titoists who are independently minded people.'

Lee's advice to the American leadership was succinctly spelt out in a conversation with Kissinger.[119]

> You haven't got the strength to convince the Thais that it is worth resisting the insurgents, nor Hanoi that if they continue, they will get met, at least not until you get an elected President … I would divide the strategy: from now to Oct 1975 and after the Presidential elections. … This is not such a long time span because this year Hanoi will do no more than take Laos. They are fully occupied with absorbing what they have already conquered. They are very careful planners, and they will step up in Thailand and Malaysia next year. The insurgents there are creatures in their own rights and they get inspired so that the governments get nervous. No one expects the Americans to be involved in guerrilla warfare anywhere. There's no use pretending. Therefore you have to give some confidence so that the will to resist doesn't disappear the way it did in South Vietnam. If they sense weakness, they will send large numbers of Pathet Lao into Thailand.

To help the rest of non-communist Southeast Asia, Lee said the US could not afford to be protectionist. Also, Washington would need to provide Thailand and

117 Memorandum of Conversation, 8 May 1975, DNSA, Kissinger Transcripts, KT01614.
118 Memorandum of Conversation, 8 May 1975, The White House, 'Memoranda of conversations – Ford Administration', Box 11, National Security Adviser, Memoranda of conversations, 197301977, Gerald R. Ford Library.
119 Memorandum of Conversation, 8 May 1975, DNSA, Kissinger Transcripts, KT01614.

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Malaysia with counter-insurgency assistance. Kissinger encouraged Lee to speaks to the American public.

By way of conclusion, Lee's consistent belief in the importance of the United States and the credibility of American power in the broader security of Singapore and the region can be seen in his letter to President Ford soon after the Mayaguez Affair (12 May 1975), a brief episode not unconnected to the Vietnam events despite it happening after the fall of Saigon and which took place not long after Lee's meeting with Ford in Washington. In his letter, he praised the President's handling of the Mayaguez Affair making the point that 'all leaders in SEA would be dismayed if an American President were meekly to do what liberals in the media advocate'.[120]

120 Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's letter to President Ford, 27 May 1975, 'Singapore - Prime Minister Lee', Box 4, National Security Adviser, Presidential Correspondence with Foreign Leaders, Gerald R. Ford Library.

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