

# Australia's Involvement in the Vietnam War, the Political Dimension Part 1

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## Introduction

This is the second post promised analysing why Australia entered the Vietnam War. American readers should be warned that because it looks primarily at the domestic political scene in Australia at the time, it does as a consequence refer to characters and events which most of you will not be aware of. However, I have included a short preface, attempting to identify most of the major players and the themes which ran behind the scenes in Australian society.

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## Preface:

There were, during the 1950's and 1960's three main political parties in Australia. They were:

**The Australian Labor Party (ALP).** A mildly left-of-centre, socialist party, the ALP was conceived, like its British and New Zealand counterparts to represent the rights of the workers against those of the employers. It held power during the years 1941-1949, being defeated after a series of disastrous Communist led coal strikes which had crippled the economy and because of fears within the electorate that its plan to nationalise the banks in 1949 meant that it was moving too far to the left.

**The Liberal Party.** A mildly, right-of-centre, conservative party, the Liberals (a misnaming if ever there was one in my opinion), were created out of the remains of the United Australia Party, which had dissolved as a consequence of losing government in 1941 as the result of a no-confidence motion in the then Prime Minister, R.G. Menzies. Menzies had then been re-elected in 1949 after skillfully making use of the electorate's fears of Communism. This "kicking the Communist can" as it became known was an electoral tactic which the Liberals used time and time again successfully as a means of keeping the ALP in Opposition.

**The Country Party.** A party which was and still is basically a mix of elements of both left and right and designed to represent the interests of the country dwellers and farmers of Australia. It held government in coalition with the Liberals during the period under examination and for a short period (second shortest on record) its leader, John McEwin was the PM after the accidental death by drowning of the Liberal PM in 1967.

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## Background History:

Australia has long suffered from a sense of unease about its position as the only European settled country in Asia. Australian society has long (and still does, unfortunately amongst some sections) harboured a fear of the "yellow hordes" waiting to "descend upon Australia" and steal it away from the privileged few white colonialists living here. While this fear could perhaps be best described as being a form of cultural paranoia (well, considering that until the end of WWII and the start of Government sponsored migration the population had stabilised at around the 7 million mark you can understand why most Australians feared the possible invasion by potential "hordes").

This fear had resulted in the formulation of one of the most restrictive immigration policies the world has seen entitled "The White Australia Policy" which was designed to prevent Asian migration and only allow in whites which were deemed by the government of the day as being suitable (thankfully that has been consigned to the dustbin of history). This fear seemed to have been proven well founded when the Japanese advanced to within comparative spitting distance of the continent in 1942.

Because of its large size and small population Australia had long relied upon what have become known as, and in some circles derided as, "great and powerful friends" to provide for its defence. First Great Britain and then America, successive Australian governments have seen the ability of the country to integrate itself into an alliance system where defence is collectively shared and Australian defence spending kept under tight control allowing the civilian population to share unrivalled prosperity (Australia before WWI had the highest standard of living per capita in the world). With the collapse of the British Empire, and perhaps most importantly the loss of the fortress of Singapore, Australia turned to the new power in the Pacific, America. A treaty formalising the new relationship between it, Australia and New Zealand called the ANZUS Pact was concluded in 1951.

However, the ANZUS Pact was designed from an American viewpoint to first reassure Australian and New Zealand concerns about a possibly rearmed and resurgent Japan and secondarily to tie America in the defence of the two former Dominions. From the Australian viewpoint, on the otherhand, it was designed to tie America first and foremost into the defence of Australia, despite the pertinent clause only requiring the three parties to "consult" in case of an attack on the others rather than necessarily having a clause like in the NATO treaty where an attack on one party is considered an attack on all parties.

So we have, by 1965, two radically different interpretations of the treaty which formed the major plank of Australian defence during the preceding decade. This was to prove important as will be explained.

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## **Why Australia became involved in the Vietnam War:**

The reasons as to why Australia became involved in the Vietnam War have been traditionally painted in the colours of "collective security" and as part of the anti-Communist "crusade" to contain a world wide communist threat. However, the decision to become involved was not one taken in isolation by the government of the day in Canberra. Rather it was the culmination of a long period of tension and unease, not as one might believe, over the idea of communist expansionism in Asia, but rather because of what was considered the unsatisfactory relationship which had developed between Canberra and Washington. The key to that relationship had been Indonesia and its relations with Australia over first Dutch West New Guinea (now Irian Jaya) and then Malaysia. Indeed as Greg Pemberton points out, "Australia's defence and foreign policy during the post war period cannot be fully understood without reference to Indonesia."<sup>1</sup>

In particular there was the problem of Dutch West New Guinea and Australia's relations with Indonesia. The Labor government under Chifley in the immediate post-war years had looked favourably upon Indonesia's claim to self-determination, reflecting a deep commitment to the Atlantic Charter of 1941 and also a desire to perhaps displace the Dutch as the main influence in the archipelago. Indeed when the Dutch attempted to use force to reassert their domination of the islands after the war, the Australian government sided with the new Republic. This annoyed both Washington and London which desired to see that the territories to Australia's north should remain in "friendly" (ie.colonial) hands. This was, according to Pemberton, "the highpoint of Australian-Indonesian relations in the post-war world and led Foreign Minister Dr. Subandria" later to describe Evatt and the Labor government as the 'mid-wife' of the Indonesian Republic."<sup>2</sup>

This attitude quickly changed when a new Liberal-Country Party coalition government took office in 1949. While it shared the same desire as its predecessor to maintain good relations with the new Republic, its past history of a vigorous opposition to the perceived threat of Communism, both at home and now abroad meant that it was quickly charting a collision course with Indonesia.

The Liberal and Country parties which constituted the government during this period had created their policy on this matter while in opposition at the end of the forties. Many of the conservative politicians who made up these two parties had been suspicious of the ambitions of the last Labor Government's Minister for External Affairs, Dr.H.V.Evatt, while the ideological affinity that was shown between the ALP and new Indonesian republic had aroused alarm. The refusal of the Communist dominated Waterside Worker's Union to load Dutch ships, bound for Indonesia, during the new republic's struggle for independence had been important in creating pro-Dutch sentiments amongst the coalition's leaders. This apparent collusion between the Indonesians and the Australian Communists was enough cause for grave suspicion amongst the soon to be elected opposition leaders, about the new republic's political alignment.<sup>3</sup>

Menzies could have perhaps overcome earlier prejudices, had it not been for Australia's perception of the strategic importance of the island of New Guinea. With the near run result of 1942 still fresh in their minds, when the Japanese onslaught had only just been stayed north of Port Moresby, it was not unusual that the new Liberal Minister for External Affairs, P.C.Spender would declare that New Guinea was, "an absolutely essential link in the chain of Australian defence" and added Australia has, "the duty of ensuring by every means open to us that in the island areas immediately adjacent to Australia, in whatever direction they lie, nothing takes place that can in any way offer a threat to Australia".<sup>4</sup>

Despite this declaration, it would have been perhaps logical that the Government would have re-evaluated its perception of the importance of New Guinea to Australia, particularly in the light of having just signed the ANZUS agreement in 1951. Article V of which guarantee the integrity of both Australia's and New Zealand's Pacific territories. This would have meant that New Guinea was no longer essential to Australia as a buffer against a possibly expansionist Indonesia as Australia's integrity was now apparently guaranteed.

So for strategic reasons, even if perhaps mistaken, the Australian government desired a continuing Dutch presence in West New Guinea. It tried to achieve this by both cooperation with the Dutch and by lobbying at the United Nations, in an effort to frustrate Indonesian claims to the island.

However, neither of these policies was pursued with any consistency. In November 1957, the Governments of Australia and the Netherlands declared a policy of close cooperation in New Guinea since,

"The territories of Netherlands New Guinea, and the Australian Trust Territory of New Guinea and Papua are geographically and ethnologically related... future development of their respective populations must benefit from cooperation in policy and administration."<sup>5</sup>

This policy of cooperation was actually only minimal for Australian policy makers knew that this principle of joint development might prove embarrassing unless it was certain that Indonesia would not be able to realise her claims to any part of New Guinea, either by force or by a Dutch withdrawal.

Throughout the fifties Australia's support for the Dutch in West New Guinea had rested upon one main assumption; that both the United States and Britain were tacitly in favour of a continuing Dutch presence there. However events were to prove this assumption wrong. The British Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan, in a joint press conference with the Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, in 1958, said that Britain was only willing to support Australia's views only on, "the plain of the UN."<sup>6</sup> Similarly American support was appearing to wane when both the they, and the British, resumed arms shipments to Indonesia, despite protests from both the Netherlands and Australia.<sup>7</sup>

When it was obvious that there was going to be no guarantee of American support for Australia's stance, the Government attempted to adopt a less rigid attitude. They invited the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Dr Subandrio, to Canberra for talks with the Australian Minister for External Affairs, R.G. Casey. At the end of these talks a communique was issued that indicated the Australian Government's willingness to adopt a more passive role if any agreement was reached between the Netherlands and Indonesia.<sup>8</sup>

With the issue of this communique the Government came under attack from many sections of the community, particularly the press.<sup>9</sup> In the face of this strong domestic opposition to the idea of Indonesian possession of West New Guinea, Prime Minister Menzies concluded that it would be politically disadvantageous, or even suicidal for him not to continue with the established policy. It should be remembered that at this time the Government's majority in the lower house consisted of one seat, and Menzies always remembered the collapse of his 1941 Government when a no confidence motion was passed against him.

Pemberton also raises the point that perhaps Menzies's government never had any real intention of modifying its real stance over the matter of West New Guinea. He suggests that these, "events were possibly part of a deliberate attempt to set up a legal smokescreen which would obscure Australia's true position."<sup>10</sup> While stating that Australia would accept any peaceful settlement, the government could not or would not, disassociate itself from the Dutch hard line and appear sympathetic to the Indonesia claim while also appearing unable to do anything to help them.

However as can be pointed out, this had one unintended consequence: by adopting a softer line the Australian government might well have encouraged the Indonesians to press their claims even harder on the Dutch. In June 1958, the Indonesian Government gave notice that it was no longer interested in legal means to settle the dispute, but would rather now concentrate, "on a contest of power" to resolve the problem. Australia's seeming intractability, despite the "new face" which Canberra had assumed over the problem after the visit of Dr. Subandrio to Canberra, was also proving to be a great irritant to Jakarta. By late 1961 the question of a continuing Dutch presence in West New Guinea had become a burning national issue.

The proceedings at the United Nations General Assembly session of 1961 left the problem even more confused. The Dutch Government, sickening of the matter, tried to hand the problem over to the UN, which refused it. The United States, and most other nations were

obviously unwilling to support any move that would keep the territory from the possession of Indonesia, for Dr. Sukarno commanded considerable influence amongst third world

At the same time India had just ended Portugal's colonial presence in Goa through the use of force. When the impotence of the UN to take action was shown, the attitudes of Indonesia, the Netherlands and the United States abruptly changed. The day after India's invasion of Goa, President Sukarno ordered a general mobilisation.<sup>11</sup> He also sent a letter to President Kennedy warning that Indonesia would use force if necessary to resolve the matter. The US Government attempted to head off armed conflict by trying to get both countries to the conference table. Kennedy pressed the Dutch to drop their preconditions to negotiations and made his Government available as a mediator.<sup>12</sup>

Though the Dutch Government steadfastly refused to drop its precondition of the principle of self-determination for the natives of West New Guinea, by the end of 1961 it seemed that the Dutch had reconciled themselves to the idea that they would have to bow to Indonesian military and American diplomatic pressures.<sup>13</sup>

Australia however continued with its hardline policy towards the problem. With the issue of a stern note to the Indonesian Ambassador Menzies made a final effort to press Indonesia to a settlement without resort to force, and Australia moved even further from the reality of the situation. Sukarno's reply showed that his Government was not impressed by Australia's declarations.

Sir Garfield Barwick, the new Minister for External Affairs, quickly realised that a continuation of this policy without backing from America, would leave Australia open to nothing but ridicule and enmity from its nearest neighbour. He issued a statement to attempt to defuse the situation. In it he reversed the earlier strategic assessment of the importance of West Guinea to Australian interests. He "saw no evidence whatever of any present threat to Australia or to any Australian interest."<sup>14</sup>

While helping in calming the situation with Indonesia to some extent the statement aroused a considerable storm of protest in some sections of the community. The Opposition leader, Arthur Calwell, called it, "...abject appeasement...A betrayal as great as Munich had been."<sup>15</sup>

But what had cause this sudden volte face of Government policy? Hanno Wiesbrod,<sup>16</sup> suggests that the Government had received from the Chiefs of Staff a strategic reassessment of the importance of West New Guinea, in the light of article V of the ANZUS agreement. The Military reported that the possession of West New Guinea by the Indonesians would not be a threat to Australia because,

1. Indonesia's offensive potential was rated as very low. It was considered to be difficult, if not impossible for Indonesia to mount and sustain a large scale invasion force.
2. The rugged remoteness of the terrain would also be an inhibiting factor for direct invasion as well as subversive activities. (Subversive activities were rated to have only nuisance value.)
3. In the event of a large scale conflict with a Communist and/or Communist supported Indonesia the American guarantee under ANZUS would operate. A repetition of a World War II experience would be unlikely since the United States had a preponderance of naval power in the Pacific.<sup>17</sup>

With the Indonesian threat destroyed by their "expert" advisers the only remaining question facing the Government was whether or not it was still in Australia's interest to continue with its opposition to Indonesia's claim.

As American support was lacking, Australia would have stood alone. Sir Garfield Barwick's argument against the standing hard line policy, still favoured by his fellow cabinet members, was that such a move would have been against the best interests of Australia, and would only have prolonged the dispute. Since the Australian half of New Guinea was guaranteed under ANZUS, it appeared dangerous and short sighted to incur the further enmity of Indonesia.

With India having set the example in Goa it was only a matter of time before Indonesia would be in conflict with the Dutch forces present in Dutch West New Guinea. The idea of Australia becoming involved in such a conflict would have been ludicrous, Australia lacked both the manpower under arms and the weapons to prosecute a conflict with Indonesia. Australia would also have become isolated in what would have appeared to be an anti-colonialist struggle. It would have embarrassed and alienated the US and would have weakened any claim Australia might have had on American assistance if eastern New Guinea had been attacked. While finally for the cabinet members who felt that Australia would have been letting down the Dutch, Barwick pointed out that the Dutch had already declared their willingness to give up their administration of the territory, at the session of the UN assembly the previous year.

So it was that Australia quickly bowed out as a major participant in the dispute. It did however still remain involved with attempts to get the Indonesians and the Dutch to negotiate over the matter. After several armed clashes, usually with the Indonesians coming off second best, an agreement was reached on 15 August 1962 with the result that the UN took over administration for a short period. This quickly ended and Indonesia assumed control of the western half of the island.

Australia finally gave into the Indonesians on the matter by justifying it to itself that it was better that the Indonesians gained the island, than the possibility of an armed conflict which would, "threaten world peace and could well bring disaster to South-East Asia by its encouragement of Communist activity and intervention."<sup>18</sup> There was also the fear that if the Indonesian government came under the pressure of promoting a war that the influence of the PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia) might become more powerful.

The result of this mishandling of the West New Guinea affair was most certainly a failure of Australian foreign policy for the Liberal-Country Party Government of the period. The Government had not attempted to point out the realities of the situation to the people, with the result that the Casey-Subandrio communique issued in 1959, which would have modified Australian policy in line with the realities of the situation, was not well received by either the public or the Opposition. This forced the Government to continue with its unrealistic policies until forced to either back them with some form of force or change them. It was only with the appointment of a new Minister for External Affairs, that Menzies was wakened to the dangerous position that his policies had placed the Government in. Being unable to back this hardline policy with either Australian or perhaps more importantly, American muscle, meant that Australia became open to ridicule, particularly when Indonesia resorted to force.

Indeed Renouf suggests that the failure of Australia's policy towards West New Guinea had fateful consequences for her Indonesian relations. "When on 17 August 1963 Sukarno acclaimed his 'Year of Triumph', he knew that his victims included Australia."<sup>19</sup> He had achieved his goal by doing whatever he liked in the teeth of Australia's opposition. Australia, Indonesia concluded, was no match for them and, in case of trouble between the two countries, Indonesia did not have to be unduly preoccupied with the reactions of Australia's protector, the United States.

This then forced the Government to back down and most certainly damaged our standing in Indonesian eyes and contributed to the formulation of a policy of "confrontation" by Dr. Sukarno as a method by which Indonesian interests could be furthered.

As we have seen Australia was unable to back its rhetoric against Indonesian expansion in New Guinea with force. One of the reasons why she was unable to do so was because the small Australian Army, which surely numbered only four Battalions of infantry plus some supporting units was already committed to other overseas countries, as well as the defence of the Australian mainland. In April 1955 Menzies had committed one of these Battalions to the defence of Malaya, where it was stationed as part of the Strategic Commonwealth Reserve.

After the success of Indonesia's policies in the matter of West New Guinea, Dr. Sukarno decided to apply them against the newly formed state of Malaysia, which consisted of Malaya, Sarawak, North Borneo, Singapore and initially Brunei. Indonesia had at first wished Malaysia all success but by the end of 1962 Jakarta had changed its tune. While it admitted it had no territorial claim upon Malaysia, Subandrio said, Indonesia could not remain indifferent to its formation because the Federation would have a common boundary with Indonesia. Just afterwards Indonesia supported a revolt in Brunei, which while not connected with the proposal for the Sultanate to join the new federation, was used as a *causus belli* for the need for confrontation on the behalf of the people of North Borneo by Jakarta.

On 20 January 1963 Subandrio announced "confrontation" with Malaysia, because Malay was not fully independent but rather "neo-colonialist". Other Indonesian leaders explained that Malaysia did not really represent the wishes of the people of North Borneo, or Sabah as it is now known, and also Sarawak.<sup>20</sup>

At first only with words, then anti-British and anti-Malaysian demonstrations and riots, it quickly became a small scale war with the beginning of the infiltration by Indonesian troops across the borders of North Borneo. Britain reacted by ordering its troops into North Borneo to defend it against Indonesian infiltrators. Australia was quick to follow, desiring to ensure that Britain remained tied into guaranteeing the stability of the region.<sup>21</sup> This left only two Battalions for the defence of mainland Australia and its widespread territories.

In November 1963, Menzies held a snap election with defence as the major issue. The items under discussion were the joint Communications base at North West Cape, the Fiji procurement decision and the Labor party's proposal of a Nuclear free Southern Hemisphere. Menzies successfully argued that Labor's policy on all three represented a danger to Australia's security. After winning an extra seven seats in Parliament the Government believed that the public supported a policy on Forward Defence and by 1965 Australian troops were fighting the Indonesian insurgents in Sabah and Sarawak.

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## **Australia's Involvement in the Vietnam War, the Political Dimension Part 2**

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The Labor party, once more consigned to the opposition benches in Parliament, pointed out that Australia was not bound in any way to help Malaysia, Australia being only committed to the defence of Malaya under the ANZAM agreement. They would have preferred a formal treaty

between the two states as to what sort of commitment that Australia was to make to Malaysian defence. This was however defeated in parliament along party lines when it went to the vote.

Although the confrontation consisted of counterinsurgency operations in North Borneo, the Government was worried about a direct attack by Indonesia against Australian territory, in particular New Guinea. When in May 1964 Sukarno called upon "21 million volunteers" to crush Malaysia, and his Government told Australia not to interfere in what was basically an Asian problem, warning that if Australia did become involved then the responsibility would be Australia's alone.<sup>22</sup>

After this was announced there followed a discussion on 21 April 1964 in Parliament, as to whether an attack by Indonesians on Australian troops in Borneo would activate the terms of the ANZUS agreement, leading to the involvement of America. After criticism from the opposition leader Arthur Calwell, who said that, "America does not believe that its commitment does include the protection of Australia troops already in Malaya".<sup>23</sup>

The Prime Minister, Robert Menzies replied that while the letter of ANZUS does not cover Australia troops stationed abroad, the intent did. He suggested that,

"The United States of America did not even withdraw its support for Malaysia. It has recognised Malaysia, and it wants Malaysia to be maintained... [but] That when it came to the immediate defence of Malaysia this was perhaps primarily a Commonwealth responsibility."<sup>24</sup>

Despite the brave words the government was worried. It feared the possibility of the confrontation escalating and that as its troops were already in contact with the Indonesians in North Borneo, that the United States would not come to its aid.<sup>25</sup>

With defence becoming more of importance in the thinking of the Government, selective compulsory conscription was introduced before Parliament on 10 November 1964.<sup>26</sup> This was to increase the Army to an effective strength of 37,000. The reason being given was a lack of sufficient volunteers, due to a period of full employment and economic expansion in the civil sector. This build up of the Army was required for, Menzies said, our deteriorating strategic situation. We expect a continuing requirement to make our forces available for cold war and counterinsurgency tasks. We must have forces ready as an immediate contribution should hostilities occur.<sup>27</sup>

The small Australia Army was over-extended by its commitments both in Malaya and Borneo and the result was that only two Battalions to defend Australia. The Army was also committed to providing "advisers" as part of an aid package to the Government of South Vietnam in its war against Communist insurgents and this was stretching its limited resources to the maximum. Obviously more manpower was required if a credible defence was to be mounted against the threat of Indonesian aggression and the only way that could be achieved was through conscription.

Then it was announced that Australian combat troops in the form of one infantry Battalion, with supporting elements, would be committed to the war in South Vietnam, on 29 April 1965. The Govt. was criticised by the Opposition as well as by a strong vocal middle-class minority which could not be dismissed as Communist or pro- Communist in their views.

This vocal minority was made up of numerous dignitaries, including Bishops of various denominations, who were extremely critical of the policies of the rapidly changing South Vietnamese Governments. They believed that the Australian Government should seek a negotiated settlement of the conflict, rather than sending more military aid.<sup>28</sup>



As a result of this decision Australian conscripts would, for the first time serve outside Australia or its territories and north of the Equator. This had not even occurred in World War II, and it particularly incensed the Opposition leader who held to the ALP's longstanding opposition to conscription for service not in the direct defence of Australia.<sup>29</sup>

This initial commitment of an Infantry Battalion quickly grew to become a Task Force (or Brigade ) of three or four Battalions with supporting units of Armour, Engineers, Artillery and Logistic support, as well as RAAF units flying Canberra's and helicopters and also naval units. The tasks of these units quickly changed, from guarding and defensive ones to offensive operations against the Vietnamese Communists. At its height the Australian commitment to Vietnam reached 8,000 men in 1968-69.

Australia's involvement in Vietnam was prompted by three main factors. Perhaps most important of these was a very poor perception by the Government of world affairs at that time. Throughout the late fifties and sixties Australian diplomatic circles were firmly convinced of a subversive "Communist Threat" outside Australia. This threat, initially directed by Moscow, and later by Beijing, dominated Australian diplomatic thought for approximately fifteen years.

It had though, roots which went much further back than that. As Frank Cain mentions,<sup>30</sup> the members of the coalition government gained anti-Communist convictions well before the second world war. He suggests that the "the road to Vietnam was not only paved with anti-radical and anti-communist rhetoric and actions but that the non-Labor forces came to be prisoners of such rhetoric."<sup>31</sup>

As a consequences of their repeated successes in federal elections, they were convinced of the appropriateness of these policies. In fact when they failed to "kick the Communist can" as they did in 1961, the coalition nearly lost office. As a consequence the anti- Communist policy of the government under Menzies became electorally self-rewarding and they sought to use it where ever possible. This does not deny that they were not totally convinced for the best of reasons but that they also managed to convince the electorate that Communism must be opposed where ever possible

As Cain suggests, when Menzies made his statement suggesting that "the takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia,"<sup>32</sup> the anti-Communist convictions developed over the previous five years were now convincing them to intervene and this action led Australia into the "quagmire of the Vietnamese civil war."<sup>33</sup>

Even after the departure of Menzies in 1965, the ideological crusade to which the Coalition was committed carried it to greater electoral victories. In the 1966 election Harold Holt's government was returned by an even greater majority by an electorate who believed in the necessity to remain in Vietnam.

However as the middle-class became more convinced about the dangers of their sons being conscripted to fight overseas in Vietnam, they switched their vote to the Labour Party in response. It was ironic that the coalition by using anti-Communist rhetoric to maintain electoral support now lost office by not taking note of it in the election which led to their defeat in 1972.

The coalition government's doubts about Indonesia's political alignment had been reinforced over the years by the acceptance of large quantities of military and civil aid by Jarkata from initially Moscow, and then later Beijing. While in retrospect it is obvious that Sukarno was playing the East off against the West in an effort to gain what he wanted, it raised fears in Canberra that Sukarno was increasingly coming under the control of the local Communist members of his government. This was further reinforced when Sukarno threatened to nationalise the three major oil companies operating in Indonesia (Shell, Caltex and Stanvac) which

represented over \$US500 million in investment.<sup>34</sup> This fear of a Indonesia becoming a Communist country on Australia's doorstep further reinforced the already rigid anti-communist stance of the coalition's leaders.<sup>35</sup>

This perception of an aggressive Communist threat in Asia prompted Australian foreign Policy planners to support American policies in Asia almost completely blind to the realities of the situation facing them. The war in Vietnam was not perceived as a local rebellion or civil war, caused by discontent, or even as a war of "national liberation" from the last vestiges of colonial rule as it perhaps should have been. Instead, it was perceived by the then Minister for External Affairs, Paul Hasluck', as he related in his policy speech on 23 March 1965, as a conflict where, "the application of the methods of and doctrines of Communist Guerrilla warfare first evolved in China and then successfully in North Vietnam."<sup>36</sup> In his judgement the South Vietnamese were not dealing simply with a situation of local unrest, but with a "large scale campaign of assassination and terrorism", the direction of which was coming from "outside".<sup>37</sup>

This "outside" direction was perceived most definitely as from Beijing. Gregory Clark suggests that this perception of Chinese aggression was carried to the point of "Sinophobia".<sup>38</sup> He relates the story of how Hasluck visited Moscow in October 1964. He was seeking to enlist Soviet aid in preventing the success of this perceived Chinese aggression in Vietnam. Needless to say the Soviets turned the discussion to things of more interest and use to them.<sup>39</sup>

This fear of Communist aggression was not, only confined to the Ministry of External Affairs. The Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, said in his policy speech on 29 April 1965 that,

the takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the countries of South and South-East Asia. It must be seen as a part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.<sup>40</sup>

The fear of this Communist aggression was founded upon what was referred to as the "Domino Theory" by its exponents. Unless this aggressive action by China was stopped in Vietnam, ran the theory, then after Vietnam had fallen, the surrounding countries would follow, just like a row of Dominoes. These countries, which tended to be neutral in their outlook, favouring neither east or west, might become embroiled in another war like Vietnam, or they might defect to the Communist line. It was feared that this "domino" action would eventually lead to Australia's shores and then the policy of forward defence would mean Darwin instead of Vietnam.

While it was in confrontation with Indonesia the government had the added fear that, as Renouf suggests, "Indonesian success with confrontation could lead to a reverse Domino Theory - from south to north - with Singapore, a strategically placed island, being an early victim,"<sup>41</sup> and with Australia being perhaps the next target.

Perhaps more significant than this as to why Australia became involved in the Vietnam War, was the Government's policy of relying on "great and powerful friends" for Australia's defence. The Government was afraid that if the problems with Indonesia came to armed conflict then Australia would be abandoned by America and Britain. The response of its two major allies, Great Britain and the United States, to the problems of West New Guinea and to a lesser extent Borneo, had convinced the government that they did not share Australia's deep concern about Indonesia. The United States was unwilling to support Australia's stand with anything more substantial than words.

Both Britain and the United States had seen it against their interests to provoke Indonesia, who commanded considerable power amongst other third world countries and

because of the large amounts of investment both countries had tied up there. They feared the danger of Sukarno nationalising their interests without compensation.<sup>42</sup>

In addition when Australia had asked the United States for , an unequivocal commitment under the ANZUS treaty, that it was willing to guarantee Australia's defence in case things with Indonesia blew up first over Dutch West New Guinea and then later in Borneo. While Pemberton suggests that in Washington's mind it was fully committed to Australia, in Canberra the lack of a public sign or declaration to that effect weighed heavily on Menzies's mind.<sup>43</sup>

So it was that Australia was seeking a method by which America could be "locked into" the defence of both Asia and in particular Australia, against this feared Communist Aggression. The opportunity presented itself when America proposed that Australia provide more advisers and some air and naval aid to Vietnam.<sup>44</sup> Australia however seized upon the chance to offer troops, particularly with the expansion of the Army to meet "a continuing requirement for cold war and counter- insurgency tasks".<sup>45</sup> While William Bundy, the Assistant Secretary of State for SE Asia, noted the offer of troops, he was more hopeful of receiving advisers instead. As America at this time was not willing to commit her own troops to Vietnam.

As Sexton suggests, this would seem to indicate that the Australians believed the Americans were not taking a tough enough line. They had allowed political events, both at home and abroad to influence their actions. The Australians believed that the Americans needed their resolve stiffened.<sup>46</sup>

So it was that Australia offered the use of ground troops on 18 December 1964. Although the announcement that this offer had been received and accepted by both the Americans and the Parliament until 29 April 1965. Although, as Sexton points out, the request that Menzies referred to in Parliament was not received by the Australian Government's representatives in Saigon until that very day had to be almost forced out of the South Vietnamese government.<sup>47</sup>

Talks on the matter had taken place well before this date, on 22 April, between the Australian and the Americans. This announcement came before an American decision to commit ground troops had occurred. So it was that at Australian insistence, Australian troops were committed to take part in the Vietnam War not, as was always stated, on the basis of an American request.<sup>48</sup>

So it can be seen from these short accounts that Indonesia's policy of Confrontation over West New Guinea and Malaysia was a major contributing factor in the Australian Government wishing to become involved in a war far from Australian shores. Other factors that contributed to this wish to become involved in an Asian war were the fear of the Domino theory, the seeming lack of American commitment to the defence of Asian and Australia in particular, and the fear of a perceived threat of Communist

As both Sexton, and Cooksey, point out, Australia was not happy with the United States' performance over the West New Guinea and Borneo affairs, so in an effort to build up a "credit of goodwill" with America that could be drawn upon in time of need it would seem that Australia decided to enter the Vietnam war.<sup>49</sup> There is an old American political adage that says "not what you have done for me, but what have you done for me lately"? So Australia became involved to show the Americans that if we were willing to help them, they would then perhaps be willing to help us if it ever came to the point of war with Indonesia.

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## Endnotes

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## **Brian Ross**

"For I will work the work in your days which ye will not believe, though it be told to you"

Habakkuk, 7th Century BC

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