



Matthew Jones, “U.S. Relations with Indonesia, the Kennedy-Johnson Transition and the Vietnam Connection, 1963-1965,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 2002): 249-281.

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In September 1963, the Federation of Malaysia, which merged an independent Malaya, the self-governing British colony of Singapore, and the British colonies in North Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak), officially came into being. Since December 1962, plans for the establishment of Malaysia had been the target of a campaign waged by the Indonesian government, which branded the proposed federation a neocolonialist scheme. Indonesian President Sukarno declared a campaign of *konfrontasi* (confrontation) against Malaysia, while the Indonesian Foreign Minister Subandrio rallied efforts to “crush Malaysia.” The war of words was accompanied by cross-border raids and Indonesian efforts to foment and assist internal uprisings in northern Borneo. The official inauguration of Malaysia only served to increase the radical militancy of Sukarno’s rhetoric while fueling diplomatic measures and continued insurgency efforts to express Indonesian opposition to the Federation.

The various phases of the Indonesian campaign against Malaysia are well-documented in J.A.C. Mackie’s *Konfrontasi: The Indonesian-Malaysian Dispute, 1963-1966*, published almost three decades ago, which remains the standard account of this regional dispute. But Indonesia’s confrontation against Malaysia and its sponsors was not solely a regional dispute; the politics of decolonization and the Cold War rendered it a matter of concern to major powers outside of the region, particularly Britain and the United States. As U.S. and British archival records have become available to scholars, accounts of this episode have focused on U.S. and British policies. Within the last few years, several English-language books have appeared on the topic, including Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in Southeast Asia, 1961-1965*. Jones’ article in *Diplomatic History* is drawn primarily from two chapters in the book.

Jones’ article discusses U.S. policy towards Indonesia between 1963 and 1965 against the backdrop of Anglo-American relations and the growing U.S. commitment to South Vietnam. He also investigates the impact of the Kennedy-Johnson transition on U.S. policy. Relying primarily on newly-declassified British and American documents, Jones has produced a study that examines Washington’s competing priorities, its relationship with its British ally, and the bureaucratic politics that shaped the Johnson administration’s approach to Indonesia and the regional dispute.

Several points emerge in Jones’ article. First, the Kennedy-Johnson transition, Jones argues, resulted in bureaucratic changes that had implications for U.S. policy towards Indonesia. By 1964, “significant shifts” in the U.S. policy led to continuing deterioration in the bilateral relationship, which eventually reduced Washington to “the role of anxious bystander” in the dramatic events of 1965. Second, a concerted British effort to persuade President Johnson and

his key advisors to recognize the connections between containing Indonesian aggression and defeating Vietnamese communism also influenced Washington's decisions. Third, the article contends that Indonesian policy became subordinated to the priority of securing British support for U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Jones argues that personnel changes, particularly in the Far East Bureau of the State Department, and bureaucratic wrangling increased the influence of those who advocated a less tolerant attitude towards Sukarno, as well as those more inclined to subsume U.S. relations with Indonesia to the demands of the increasing U.S. commitment to South Vietnam. Both Averell Harriman, who served as Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs from November 1961 through April 1963, when he was appointed Undersecretary for Political Affairs, and Roger Hilsman, Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research within the State Department before succeeding Harriman as Assistant Secretary, had been particularly influential within the State Department during the Kennedy years. As vocal advocates for a conciliatory approach toward Sukarno, they had the ear of President Kennedy, who was similarly inclined. Lyndon Johnson, however, distrusted both Harriman and Hilsman. This antipathy, according to Jones, derived from their support for the removal of Ngo Dinh Diem in the bureaucratic struggle over Vietnam policy that took place in spring and summer of 1963, a position which then-Vice President Johnson opposed. Moreover, Johnson himself did not like Sukarno and was disinclined to tolerate his often melodramatic outbursts. Harriman, Hilsman and their allies found their influence curtailed and their access to the President severely limited in the Johnson administration. Instead Johnson turned increasingly to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara for advice. Those who argued for preserving some measure of U.S. influence with Indonesia became increasingly marginalized in the decision-making process. The result, in early 1964, was Johnson's refusal to sign even a limited presidential determination tying continued aid to Indonesia with U.S. national interest, stipulated by an amendment to the 1963 Foreign Assistance Act. Furthermore, McNamara accrued significant oversight authority in determining aid to Indonesia that was already in the pipeline. This "less forgiving stance," Jones argues, was only an initial step. Eventually, the United States reduced its assistance program in Indonesia. Relations between the two countries worsened over the next year, bottoming out in the summer of 1965 when Indonesians attacked the U.S. consulates and the Johnson administration privately spoke of the possibility of war.

While the change in administrations and bureaucratic politics played important roles, Jones exaggerates their importance. Other factors, such as Indonesian actions and developments inside Indonesia, Jones mentions only in passing. The decisions that the Johnson administration made cannot be divorced from the provocations in the form of Sukarno's public diatribes against the United States as well as the continued insurgency in north Borneo in 1964. Those provocations in turn had domestic political implications for a President during a presidential election year and could well have shaped some of Johnson's policy choices in the Indonesian situation.

Jones also provides a penetrating analysis of the British role in influencing U.S. policy towards Indonesia. British initiatives further doomed the efforts of Harriman, Hilsman and others in their group to maintain a conciliatory approach towards Indonesia, which President Kennedy had supported. Finding a more receptive audience in the Johnson White House, British officials

sought to manipulate the Americans into sharing their analysis of how confrontation would have a detrimental effect on Western interests in Southeast Asia, and consequently secure demonstrations of Washington's support for Malaysia. At quadripartite (Australia, Britain, New Zealand, United States) talks in February 1964, Harriman and Hilsman defended the need to maintain some measure of influence with Sukarno and cautioned against measures isolating him and Indonesia, but theirs was an increasingly unpopular position. At high level meetings, British Foreign Secretary R.A. Butler and Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home reiterated to Secretary Rusk and President Johnson British support for U.S. efforts in Vietnam and Laos, and held out tantalizing prospects of expanding British counterinsurgency training for South Vietnamese officers. Worried about French proposals for a neutral zone in Southeast Asia, concerns fanned by the British, the Johnson White House welcomed British offers to support U.S. goals in Vietnam. These talks convinced the British of the alignment of official Anglo-American positions, and marked, according to Jones, "a crucial watershed in the development of Anglo-American views." Unlike the Kennedy administration, the Johnson administration became less enamored of an Asian solution to the Indonesian-Malaysian dispute, with minimal intervention by Western powers. In July, the Johnson administration extended economic and military assistance to Malaysia. Thereafter, U.S.-Indonesian relations continued to worsen.

Jones' article succeeds in what he sets out to do-demonstrate how bureaucratic changes resulting from the Kennedy-Johnson transition, U.S. relations with an important ally, Britain, and the growing U.S. preoccupation with Vietnam combined to shape American policy toward Indonesia. Judged within those parameters, he has done a marvelous job. What leaves me dissatisfied-and I know this is criticizing the author for what he did not set out to do-are questions he leaves unaddressed. For example, was the Hilsman-Harriman approach discarded because of the conditions Jones discusses in the article? Or was it also abandoned because it had not produced any significant results? After all, what did Washington have to show for the aid that it had extended to Jakarta? Going back well into the Eisenhower years, Sukarno had provided no assurance that Washington could moderate his rhetoric or actions. Far from becoming more malleable, Sukarno appeared just as determined to pursue his own course of action. The larger question is one surrounding the efficacy of economic and military assistance as an instrument of foreign policy, especially involving a neutralist government. How much influence can a modest aid program exert?

Another weakness in the article is the relatively little attention paid to the Indonesian angle in this story. It examines how policy is made in Washington, but not how developments in Jakarta might have shaped that policy. Other than Sukarno and the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) and a brief reference to General Nasution, the article virtually ignores Indonesian officials and organizations active in the government during confrontation. Jones tells us what British officials were saying to each other and to their American counterparts, just as he explores policy deliberations among U.S. policymakers, but he is silent on what Indonesian officials were communicating to U.S. embassy personnel in Jakarta and officials in Washington. Part of this may have arisen from the necessity of limiting the work to article length, but the absence of Indonesian voices (other than Sukarno's strident tones) and any analysis of internal Indonesian developments that may have influenced U.S. policy certainly leaves the story incomplete.

Despite these shortcomings, Jones' article is a valuable contribution to the scholarship on U.S. policy in the Indonesian-Malaysian dispute. Those interested in major-power interests and actions in Southeast Asia will do well to read the article and the book from which it is drawn. Jones' conclusions in the article certainly enhance our understanding of how Vietnam came to dominate U.S. foreign policy in other areas.

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