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Review by **Sean Fear**, Cornell University

In a field as thoroughly analyzed as American foreign policy in Southeast Asia, the release of a new collection of sources is always a welcome event. Volume E-12 of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS) series, published online in March 2011, features some 425 documents drafted between 1973-1976, many of which were recently declassified. Unsurprisingly, the Vietnam War looms large, with American officials striving to maintain the United States' credibility in the eyes of key allies in spite of domestic pressure to withdraw from the region. The collection also reveals a preoccupation with regional stability, reflected, for instance, in the decision to support Indonesia's 1975 invasion of newly-independent East Timor. Elsewhere, the United States monitored Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia, welcomed the military's increasing involvement in Thai politics, and worked to prevent disputes over financial, environmental, trade and nuclear policies from disrupting relations with Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and others.

Although the Vietnam War is one of the most intensely scrutinized topics in American foreign policy history, much of the scholarship thus far has focused on the escalation of the war. Developments occurring after the 1968 Tet Offensive, and especially after the withdrawal of U.S. ground troops by 1973, on the other hand, have received comparatively less attention. The September 2010 release of *FRUS* "Volume X, Vietnam January 1973 – July 1975," along with the current volume (E-12) which covers events after the fall of Saigon, will no doubt encourage further study of the final years of the conflict and its aftermath. Perhaps the most surprising feature of U.S.-Vietnamese relations following the Communist takeover is the initial cordiality between the former enemies. On May, 28, 1975 Hanoi insisted (via a Soviet back channel) that it bore "no enmity" towards Washington, and even suggested that it had purposefully delayed its invasion of the South in order to give American personnel in Saigon enough time to organize their withdrawal (75). In

response, the White House, which interpreted Vietnam's goodwill gesture as "genuine," instructed a contact in France to inform Hanoi that "the United States side bears no hostility in principle toward the D.R.V. side (76)." American willingness to explore improved relations with its adversary was in part due to the recognition that, contrary to the assumptions of an earlier generation of U.S. statesman, a unified Vietnam posed little threat to the rest of Southeast Asia. Though the State Department was convinced that Hanoi was orchestrating the Pathet Lao's consolidation of power in Laos (75), it saw little evidence of Vietnamese ambitions beyond Indochina, a point which American officials consistently raised in meetings with their counterparts in Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, among others.

Nonetheless, while the contents of *FRUS* E-12 suggest that both the United States and Vietnam were sincere in their pursuit of reconciliation, several key issues remained unresolved, resulting in increasing tension, and ultimately, in the breakdown of relations between the two sides. One such source of contention was Hanoi's heavy-handed consolidation of power in the South. U.S. observers were initially unsure about the pace and intensity with which North Vietnam would proceed, with Assistant Sec. State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Philip Habib among those who expected that the Provisional Revolutionary Government (successor to the National Liberation Front) would continue to function as a semi-autonomous front for South Vietnamese communism (65). But by November 1975, it was clear that "although the communists are maintaining the fiction of an independent South Vietnamese state, there is no question that Vietnam is now one country with one policy," as Henry Kissinger informed President Ford in a highly critical memorandum on the state of affairs in the South (80). Reports of heavy-handed government, the mass imprisonment of political enemies, economic stagnation, corruption, and the plight of the boat people dismayed those in Washington who had hoped Hanoi would pursue a more moderate course, leading to a hardening of attitudes toward Vietnam.

The sale of captured American military hardware by the Vietnamese to other states in the region was another source of unease for U.S. authorities, who worried that the weapons might ultimately end up in the hands of enemies as far away as Libya. And though, after much debate, the National Security Council decided against working to block the sales, the episode nonetheless resulted in heightened suspicions (86-88). Hanoi's increasing dependence on the Soviet Union also alarmed the United States, a predictable if somewhat unreasonable reaction given that American refusal to provide much-needed development assistance left war-torn Vietnam with few other viable partners (85).

By far the most contentious issue, however, was Vietnam's perceived unwillingness to assist with recovering the bodies of American MIAs, then and now a sensitive subject which reveals the impact of domestic political concerns on American foreign policy-making. For the Vietnamese, cooperation with the United States on MIAs served as a bargaining chip to be exchanged for diplomatic recognition and above all, economic assistance (93). The U.S., on the other hand, saw the resolution of the MIA issue as a prerequisite for negotiations on recognition and aid, and as time went on, American officials grew frustrated with the pace of Vietnamese progress. And with significant segments of the American public convinced that Hanoi still held U.S. soldiers in captivity, the political cost of providing aid to Vietnam

steadily increased. As Henry Kissinger observed in April 1975, “it was absolutely clear to me at the congressional leadership meeting yesterday that the overwhelming sentiment of the leaders that were at that meeting was against aid to Communist Vietnam. And in fact, a number of them said if they had any idea that it would pass... they would add a rider to the foreign aid bill prohibiting it” (65). By November 1976, the United States had declined to recognize the Hanoi regime, vetoed Vietnam’s bid for United Nations membership, and refused to provide it with economic assistance because of its failure to meet American MIA demands, a policy which First Secretary of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam Embassy in France Do Thanh described as “incommensurate, unfriendly,” and in violation of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords (91, 93). The relationship continued to deteriorate, especially after Vietnam’s December 1978 invasion of Cambodia.¹ But as *FRUS* E-12 reveals, the origins of Vietnam’s virtual isolation during the 1980s and early 1990s can be traced to the aftermath of the war, a time period which has thus far received relatively little scholarly attention.

American policy towards Cambodia during the ascent of the Khmer Rouge was likewise informed by domestic political considerations. As early as January 1975, four months before the fall of Phnom Penh, the C.I.A. anticipated that “bloodletting would be inevitable” should the communists take power, an event which would result in the confiscation of private land and the evacuation of urban centres to the countryside (64). Indeed, as several of the newly-released documents in *FRUS* E-12 indicate, Washington was well aware of Khmer Rouge atrocities from the outset, with the State Department and C.I.A. continuously monitoring Cambodia’s grim descent. Nonetheless, with the American public thoroughly disenchanted with military intervention in Southeast Asia, there was virtually no discussion of attempting to end the genocide. As Kissinger remarked, the reputation of the U.S. government was so low that “we have reached a point where if people run extermination camps, unless you have international inspection it is not recognized by the liberal community” (65).

Meanwhile, following Indonesia’s December 1975 invasion of the former Portuguese colony of East Timor, another atrocity was taking place, as the suppression of the Timorese at the hands of Indonesian forces resulted in the deaths of up to 180,000 people (of a population of 700,000), according to the East Timor Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation.²

Here *FRUS* E-12 proves especially valuable in detailing American support for the invasion, complementing (and in some cases overlapping) a series of documents posted by the National Security Archive. Once again, domestic political considerations dominated the policy-making process, as the United States struggled to maintain smooth relations with

¹ This topic has been covered, *inter alia*, in Steven Hurst. *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996, and Edwin A. Martini. *Invisible Enemies: the American War on Vietnam 1975-2000*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007.

² Secretariado Técnico Pós -CAVR (Timor-Leste). *Introducing... Chega!, the Report of the Commission for Reception Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste (CAVR)*. Dili, East Timor: STP-CAVR, 2006.

Indonesia – “the most important country in Southeast Asia,” according to Kissinger – in the face of congressional pressure to cut military assistance to the island nation (142). Aware of Indonesia’s plans for months before the invasion took place, American officials determined that tacit support for President Suharto was the best course of action since, as a February 1975 contingency paper put it, “U.S. interests in Indonesia are important; in East Timor virtually nil.” Although the paper predicted that the U.S. public reaction to Indonesian annexation “would not be too adverse,” and that other developing countries “would not make our position on Timor a deciding factor in bilateral relations,” the Ford administration nonetheless took steps to cover its tracks (119). In perhaps the most telling instance, Kissinger requested during a December 6, 1975 meeting with Suharto in Jakarta that he postpone the invasion until after Kissinger and Ford departed since “we would be able to influence the reaction in America if whatever happens happens after we return... this way there would be less chance of people talking in an unauthorized way” (142).

In shedding light on this still relatively obscure episode in American foreign relations history, *FRUS E-12* reveals a United States struggling to maintain its traditional alliances in the face of domestic pressure to scale back its commitments to the region. With the Vietnam War fresh in the minds of policy-makers and the public alike, public opinion played an important role in shaping U.S. foreign policy, even in age of statesman noted for their apparent devotion to detached ‘realpolitik.’ This volume contains of wealth of new information on executive branch decision-making in the post-Vietnam War era, making it an important and welcome contribution to the field.

Sean Fear is a doctoral candidate at Cornell University. His interests include American foreign policy and Vietnamese history, and his dissertation focuses on U.S.-South Vietnamese relations following the 1968 Tet Offensive.

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