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Review by Peter Boyce, Research Fellow, University of Tasmania’s School of Government

Andrea Benvenuti and Martin Jones correctly identify Australia’s decision to withdraw forces from Malaysia in 1973 as “a neglected but defining episode in the evolution of Australian postwar diplomacy”. Its neglect is no more evident than in the comprehensive, quasi-official history of Australia’s relations with Asia, Facing North, wherein barely one paragraph is devoted to the Gough Whitlam government’s severe downgrading of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). I would also endorse their assessment that the Whitlam government’s foreign policy record overall was not nearly as successful as some of its historians have claimed. They are justified, too, in emphasising that Australia was engaging quite actively with several Asian states during the Menzies era and during the administrations of his immediate Coalition successors. Nevertheless, I think these two authors may have failed to recognise that Prime Minister Whitlam’s foreign policy initiatives generated a welcome national mood change of lasting and generally positive significance, and which the Coalition government that succeeded Labor made little attempt to reverse.

By the end of 1972 there was a widespread popular desire, even among many supporters of the conservative Coalition, for opportunities to break loose from the constrictions of a foreign policy which was essentially reactive and which had become somewhat sclerotic, embarrassingly deferential to Washington’s presumed wishes within a rigidly ideological Cold War framework. Gough Whitlam replaced one of the least distinguished prime ministers in Australian history—undistinguished in both domestic and external policy spheres. William McMahon had resisted the urgings of his professional Foreign Affairs advisers and even some of his Cabinet colleagues to pursue several foreign policy initiatives, most importantly an offer of diplomatic recognition to the People’s Republic of China. In resisting this pressure he suffered a particular humiliation from President
Richard Nixon at the time of Henry Kissinger’s secret visit to China in 1971. McMahon had not been forewarned of course, and was trumpeting Washington’s insistence on a non-recognition policy at the very time of Kissinger’s secret conversations with Premier Chou En-lai. Whitlam, on the other hand, had visited Beijing as leader of the Opposition shortly before Kissinger and was able to capitalise on Washington’s dramatic change of direction. Reinforcing this embarrassment was a widespread public questioning of the Coalition’s unqualified support of the United States in the failed Vietnam War, especially its commitment of Australian troops. There was also increasing disquiet about limited Australian access to (or control of) US intelligence facilities at Pine Gap and Northwest Cape.

Unfortunately the Australian Labor Party had concluded, mistakenly, that the worst of the Cold War was over by late 1972, and its left-wing foolishly equated the role of Australia’s forces in Malaysia-Singapore with its troop deployments in Vietnam. This was a serious misreading of their purpose and the regional response to their presence, but the new government wasted no time in announcing a graduated withdrawal from FPDA.

It is true that Canberra had maintained quite extensive bilateral and multilateral links with several Asian states during the 1950s and ‘60s, but these were essentially anti-Communist alliances or legacies of colonialism. Useful and constructive though they may have been in the Cold War era, there was by 1972 an understandable desire within the professional foreign affairs bureaucracy and within the academic foreign affairs commentariat to see Canberra project a more imaginative, ambitious and “independent” profile as at least a junior middle power.

Following the McMahon government’s crushing defeat at the polls in December 1972 the Coalition parties found themselves deprived of access to their public service advisers for the first time in twenty-three years. Accordingly the new “shadow” minister for foreign affairs, Andrew Peacock, formed a small committee to help him draft an Opposition foreign policy platform. I had the pleasure of serving on it (along with the newly elected MP, John Howard), and I distinctly recall that there was agreement that the basic direction of the Whitlam government’s foreign policy should not be abandoned. There was recognition, however, of a need to repair damage to the special relationship with Washington and to be less strident and brash in proclaiming an “independent” foreign policy posture.

I share the regrets of Benvenuti and Martin Jones that Whitlam found it necessary to announce a dramatic scaling down of Australia’s commitment to the Five Power Defence Arrangements, and said so publicly at the time, but notwithstanding the evidence these two scholars offer of deep concerns within the British Foreign Office about Canberra’s approach to these arrangements, the Australians were becoming increasingly aware of Britain’s own changing priorities. Edward Heath could scarcely be considered a stalwart loyalist of the Commonwealth or deeply preoccupied with Southeast Asian affairs. Alec Douglas-Home, as foreign secretary, was admittedly committed to the Five Power
Arrangements, but one doubts whether his views represented the mainstream of Conservative Party thinking. The authors are probably right in their claim that Lee Kuan Yew, the prime minister of Singapore, was disappointed by the Whitlam government’s decision, that his Malaysian counterpart, Tun Abdul Razak, was quite comfortable with FPDA, and that Indonesia’s President Suharto was eager to retain the status quo as well.

It is doubtful, however, whether FPDA could ever have become a wider framework for regional security. The Malaysian prime minister was already promoting a new regional concept, the “zone of peace, freedom and neutrality” (ZOPFAN) within ASEAN in 1972, and a later prime minister, the radical Malay nationalist, Mohamed Mahathir, no friend of Australia, may well have repudiated FPDA had it been retained in its original form.

In summary, I share the authors’ contention that much of the history of Australian foreign policy of the post-1970s era has been written by Labor sympathisers, and I would certainly question some of the Whitlam government’s legacy (more perhaps the style of its diplomacy than the substance of policy), but I think the authors overlook Whitlam’s contribution to a change of mood in Australia about the possibilities of a more broadly focussed engagement with Asia, less constrained by Cold War considerations, and which would carry no neo-colonial overtones. The Whitlam government’s conduct of foreign policy has rightly been characterised by a respected diplomatic historian, Peter Edwards, as a combination of “impatience, ardour and inexperience.” Benvenuti and Martin Jones have with good reason questioned its track record in handling Southeast Asian affairs, and by drawing heavily on British and Australian archival sources, they have invited a reappraisal of that “neglected but defining episode” of 1973.

Emeritus Professor Peter Boyce AO holds a Ph.D. from Duke University and has taught and published in the field of foreign policy and diplomacy, as well as comparative politics, at several Australian universities. His most recent book was The Queen’s Other Realms: The Crown and its Legacy in Australia, Canada and New Zealand. (Sydney: Federation Press, 2008). He is currently an honorary research fellow in the University of Tasmania’s School of Government.

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