Reform and Renewal

Reform and Renewal: Transatlantic Relations during the 1960s and 1970s

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

The Atlantic Alliance, born of cultural and economic ties, and cemented by the military coalition against Nazi Germany during World War II, became the defining feature of the post-1945 security apparatus in Western Europe. The Cold War provided a context and need for ever-increasing levels of transatlantic cooperation. The initiation of the European Recovery Program, or Marshall Plan, was indicative of the importance of transatlantic trade, and the free trade model, to the US economy. It also highlighted the significance placed by the US and European governments on forging a vibrant Western European economy as a barrier to the Soviet Union's expansion in Europe. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), founded in 1949 and based on a military alliance originally conceived by the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, enhanced the American role in European defence and created a formalised military alliance, which stood in stark contrast to its neighbours to the east in Europe. The incorporation of West Germany into NATO in 1955 provided a solution, albeit one not universally welcomed in Europe, to the issue of German rearmament. While transatlantic cooperation may have been a significant feature of security matters during this period, there were also signs of American unilateralism in policy-making, such as Korea, and signs of European discord and division. The Suez Crisis of 1956-57 served as a clear example of the potential for the divergence of transatlantic objectives and interests, and demonstrated the indisputable superiority of the American diplomatic position.

By the 1960s, earlier signs of tension in the Atlantic Alliance had given way to open criticism of US foreign policy, most notably in Southeast Asia. Beginning in 1959, France's President Charles de Gaulle, already an outspoken critic of the apparent "special relationship" between the United Kingdom and the United States, incrementally withdrew French fleets from NATO's command and set about creating a separate French defence force. President John F. Kennedy's state visits to France in 1961 and West Germany in 1963 proved highpoints in European popular perceptions of the American president and the US commitment to European security. De Gaulle's criticism of Kennedy's policies in Southeast Asia, however, demonstrated the stark differences between many Europeans' approaches to the Cold War outside Europe and those of the

Kennedy administration. President Lyndon Johnson thus inherited more than an extensive US commitment to prevent the spread of communism in Asia; he also inherited a legacy of European hostility to an American military intervention in Vietnam. In the case of France, this hostility was public and sustained. While the other European allies were far more muted in their criticism of Johnson's policies, the absence of allied support for US intervention in Southeast Asia had a significant impact on transatlantic relations.

Post-1945 co-operation, combined with European dependence and US direction increasingly gave way to mutual resentment, economic competition and division over military and foreign policies. Political discord in the United States encouraged liberals' questioning of the rationale for the post-war policy of global Containment, ending two decades of broad bi-partisan agreement on foreign policy issues. Congressional demands for a reduction of US forces based in Europe and an overall reduction in defence expenditure reflected the changing context of American foreign policy-making. European liberals also focused on reducing their state's defence budgets, a process that further demonstrated the real cost of funding the Atlantic Alliance. The US economy was weakened by the cost of the war in Vietnam and by sustained, if not runaway, inflation throughout much of the 1960s. The administration of President Richard Nixon, forced to deal with these economic difficulties, abandoned the gold standard in 1971. In part, this initiative was a response to French efforts to reduce US economic influence in Europe by acquiring gold from the US government, and reflected the divergent economic goals of the Atlantic partners. US economic concerns, coupled with new foreign policy priorities, led the Nixon Administration to adopt policies that directly challenged European economic and security concerns.

The Nixon administration's foreign policy by no means intended to ignore the significance of the Atlantic Alliance, but neither did it place transatlantic cooperation at the heart of America's Cold War security apparatus. Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger formulated a global policy based on the concept of détente. Focusing on the redefinition of US relations with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China in particular, détente was marked by Nixon and Kissinger's emphasis on establishing stability in international relations. As such, the administration's policy departed from the post-1945 focus on the ideological containment of communism. Détente incorporated arms control and reduction negotiations, measures largely welcomed by America's European allies. The failure to fully consider European security concerns was made clear, however, by the administration's articulation of

the Nixon Doctrine in 1969. This strategic initiative called on allies to assume a greater share of their own defence, rather than depend on direct US military intervention. While originally intended to apply to Asian states militarily engaged in combating communism, the doctrine leant credence to domestic demands for the United States to reduce its direct aid to Western Europe. The clandestine and highly bilateral nature of the Americans' summit diplomacy also demonstrated the weakened position of the Atlantic Alliance in the administration's strategic priorities.

Despite the obvious tensions between the Atlantic partners, this was also the time when transatlantic relations experienced rejuvenation. Domestic political dynamics influenced this evolving US-European order, as shifts in the power balances between liberals and conservatives altered the political landscape. The rise of conservatism in the United States, no less than the debacle in Vietnam, augured new foreign policy priorities for American leaders during the mid-late 1970s. Coinciding with the renewed focus on economic liberalism on both sides of the Atlantic, the influence of conservatives in redefining international relations became increasingly prominent.

Consisting of four sections, this volume explores the key themes of transatlantic relations during the 1960s and 1970s: European influences on US foreign policies; US attitudes towards and influences on the process of European integration; the impact of détente on European and US policies regarding the Soviet Union and the states of Eastern Europe; and the immediate and long-term impacts of Kissinger's ill-fated "Year of Europe". Together, these four sections offer transnational perspectives on the making of states' individual foreign policies.

Histories of transatlantic relations have tended to focus on the role that the United States played in determining the foreign policies of European states. In the immediate post-war period, the United States enjoyed a particular privilege as the guarantor of the security of Western Europe, and succeeded in using its diplomatic leverage to impact the process of decolonisation. It is essential, however, to acknowledge the degree to which the relationship was reciprocal, and the extent to which this reciprocity continued into the 1960s, when the United States increasingly focused its attention on areas beyond Europe. The two essays in Part I, *Transatlantic Dialogues, 1961-64*, offer transnational perspectives on the making of US foreign policy during the early 1960s. They recognise that transatlantic dialogues were influential in determining US policy in areas such as Southeast Asia, and argue that the Anglo-American special relationship remained particularly strong as late as 1964. By focusing on how France and Britain influenced US policy in the Cold War battleground

of Laos from 1961 to 1963, the first essay extends our understanding of the multilateral formulation of US foreign policy. The outcome in Laos proved crucial in determining US policy in Vietnam, when European warnings against intervention were sidelined. The second essay helps explain the reduced role that European powers were able to play in influencing US policy, by examining previously tangential areas of foreign policy. The essay argues for the need to re-examine the importance of the relationship between President Lyndon Johnson and Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home in order to fully understand the nature of transatlantic dialogues during this period.

The creation of the European Coal and Steel Community all helped to redefine the nature of the Atlantic Alliance. The signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and the subsequent formation of the European Economic Community added yet another dimension to this evolving relationship. Much of the existing historiography has tended to consider the transatlantic dialogue from the perspective of individual states. Part II, *The United States and European Integration*, traces the development of American attitudes to European integration. The first essay compares the attitudes of the European Commission and the United States to the first British application for membership of the European Community. It assesses the Commission's influence on American officials prior to and during the abortive membership negotiations. With the subsequent departure of French President Charles de Gaulle in 1969, the British application for membership of the European Community was revived. Negotiations gained an additional impetus with the election of Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath in June 1970. The final essay in this section examines the extent to which American interest in the Community was reinvigorated by the prospect of British participation and considers the influence of American involvement on the outcome of the enlargement negotiations.

Détente marked a departure in both European and US foreign policies. Initially an innovation in West German policy towards it eastern neighbours, détente came to dominate the foreign policy of the Nixon administration. From the US standpoint, détente was marked by increased cooperation with the Soviet and Chinese communist powers and a reorientation away from the traditional focus on multi-lateral security alliances with western European states. The European states viewed the policy in somewhat different terms, believing that the extension of cooperation with the states of Eastern Europe would enhance their security and reduce Soviet dominance in the region. This decreased dependency on the United States for the provision of European security. The third section

of this volume, *Détente and Transatlantic Relations*, therefore explores the question of arms control and disarmament détente in Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It examines the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), a defining moment in East-West relations, and explores the ways in which domestic politics influenced US policy toward Europe. As the first essay discusses, European states differed greatly from the United States in their interpretations of the purpose of the CSCE and, indeed, the extent to which such an international conference was warranted. The premise of arms negotiations and the principles underlying détente were vociferously denounced by conservatives in the United States. The second essay in this section explores the rationale underlying the conservative challenge to the Nixon administration's foreign policies, and examines the ways in which the European allies' embrace of Ostpolitik and arms negotiations influenced conservatives' interpretations of the efficacy of relying on the Atlantic Alliance. The success of conservatives in challenging the Nixon-Kissinger policy ultimately provided the opportunity for enhanced US-European cooperation during the late 1970s. Reeling from earlier disagreements, however, transatlantic relations were marked by continued disharmony until the emergence of a new force in international relations, the conservative Reagan-Thatcher alliance during the 1980s. This section provides an important reinterpretation of the bases for this alliance and the factors that continued to influence US-Western European relations as the Cold War intensified during the late 1970s.

The final section, *The Year of Europe*, looks at the contrasting European reactions to Henry Kissinger's attempts to initiate a comprehensive reassessment of the transatlantic relationship. The first essay examines the origins of the initiative and considers the extent to which it was an attempt by the United States to influence the process of European Political Cooperation, the effort to coordinate European foreign policy. It examines the institutional difficulties faced by the newly enlarged Community, as member states sought to overcome their specific regional interests and formulate a coherent and unified response to the Year of Europe. It also considers the dilemmas faced by British foreign policy-makers as they sought to reconcile the ambitions of Prime Minister Edward Heath, who was determined to prioritise the development of an ever-closer European economic and political union, with Britain's traditionally Atlanticist foreign policy. With the defeat of Heath's Government in February 1974, observers in Washington were quick to note that the former prime minister's advocacy of Britain's European cause had "allowed the rope to go slack" and "opportunities to go

unexploited". The incoming Labour Government was determined to renew traditional patterns of Atlantic collaboration. Both as foreign secretary and as prime minister from 1976 to 1979, James Callaghan was determined to repair relations with Washington. His efforts to revive the role of Atlantic intermediary contrast markedly with Heath's refusal to become Nixon's "privileged insider". Nevertheless, even this seemingly cordial relationship was not without its flashpoints, as discussed in the second essay. The Cyprus crisis of 1974 demonstrated both the precarious nature of the East-West détente as well as the mercurial nature of Kissinger's personal diplomacy. The final essay in this section offers an additional perspective on the divisions within Europe over the Atlanticist foreign policies of individual states. Challenging existing historiographical assessments of Dutch foreign policy during the 1970s, it considers how the Dutch, under Foreign Minister Joseph Luns, remained ideologically loyal to Washington. The existence of this "other special relationship" demonstrates the fragmented nature of transatlantic diplomacy. The unilateral character of Dutch Atlanticism was highlighted during the Middle East tensions of October 1973, demonstrating that the Dutch were prepared to prioritise Atlantic unity over European cooperation, even if this resulted in their isolating themselves from their traditional Community partners.

The post-1960 era constitutes a distinct phase of the transatlantic relationship, which has been somewhat overlooked by the existing historiography. *Reform and Renewal* offers a succinct analysis of the political changes which helped redefine the transatlantic relationship in the turbulent international climate of the 1960s and 1970s. Heavily based on recent archival research, it provides an examination of the interrelationship between domestic and foreign policies and the broader structural factors shaping transatlantic relations. The collection aims to generate further dialogue and debate by illuminating not only the key events and themes in the transatlantic relationship, but also the interrelationship between domestic political factors and foreign policy initiatives. As such, it makes a significant contribution to the emerging literature.

PART I

TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUES, 1961-1964

CHAPTER ONE

EXCEPT IN THE CASE OF LAOS: THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION AND TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUE ON THE LAOTIAN CRISIS

FRANÇOIS LALONDE

Following the 1954 Geneva Conference which brought French control over its Indochinese colonies to an end, Laos became embroiled in a conflict between the Royal Government, supported by the Americans, and the Pathet Lao, a guerrilla movement armed and funded by the Soviet Union. By 1957, a fragile agreement had been brokered by Laotian Prince Souvanna Phouma, who managed to create a neutral government which included the Pathet Lao. However, General Phoumi Nosavan, the head of the Royal Army, twice overthrew Phouma's neutral government with American support in the late 1950s. When Kennedy came to the White House, the situation in Laos had deteriorated into a civil war, and the Pathet Lao, with Soviet support, seemed on their way to taking over the country. One of the first foreign policy decisions that the new president had to make was how to best prevent this outcome, and whether preventing the fall of Laos to communism required, or in fact was worth risking, an American military intervention. Most scholarship on John F. Kennedy's Southeast Asia policies focuses on Vietnam. Yet during the first years of the Kennedy administration, Laos was far more important to the president than Vietnam. The threat of communism seemed more urgent there and accordingly much more time and effort was expended trying to prevent the fall of Laos than worrying about Vietnam.

A few historians have identified the importance of Laos. Kenneth Conboy, Stephen Pelz and Roger Warner, for example, argued that the neutralist policy pursued by the president was part of a larger strategy to enable him to pursue a more vigorous anti-communist policy in Vietnam.[1]

In contrast, historians such as Edmund Wehrle perceived Kennedy's motives as much more complex, describing his position on Laos as part of a larger strategy for Southeast Asia and arguing that he earnestly sought a neutralist position in Laos, and displayed political courage in sometimes going against his advisors.[2] However, historians of the Kennedy administration's Laotian policies have focused almost exclusively on the internal dynamics of the decision making process and have ignored the international dimensions of the problem, failing to account for the transatlantic dialogue occurring between Washington and its European Allies and its influence on policy-making towards Southeast Asia.[3]

The transformation of Kennedy's policy towards Laos was stark. Early on, the new president seemed to be seriously contemplating going to war to keep Laos from falling to Communism; he went as far as to publicly announce that the fate of Laos would "tell us something about what kind of future our world is going to have".[4] Within a few months, however, he had clearly changed his mind, agreeing to reconvene the Geneva Conference and instructing his envoy, Averell Harriman, that: "I want a settlement. I don't want to send troops".[5] The decision to move away from military intervention was certainly driven by many considerations. The logistical problems involved in supplying a fighting force in a landlocked country have been stressed most often by historians.[6] Another contributing factor emphasised in a recent interpretation by historian Seth Jacobs argues that Kennedy's reluctance to intervene militarily was driven by racial perceptions of the Lao people as "indolent", "worthless" and "incorrigible pacifists", much less likely to stand firm against communist aggression than the Vietnamese.[7] While both of these factors did contribute to the American decision making process in Laos, it becomes clear once the Laotian crisis is placed in global perspective, that the reticence of American allies across the Atlantic had just as much, if not more, of an impact on the Kennedy administration's Laotian policies than either race or logistics.

The decision making process surrounding U.S. policy in Laos was not devoid of outside influence. Third parties played an important role, and examining the ways in which American allies such as France and Britain managed to influence the thought processes of American policy makers yields a much better understanding of the Kennedy administration's Laotian policy. Washington was not alone in following the events unfolding in Laos in the early 1960s. American allies across the Atlantic were similarly closely monitoring developments and had their own reasons for reluctantly supporting, in the case of Britain, and opposing, in the case of France, an American military intervention in Laos. France and Britain,

both members of the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the two most powerful American allies, each had an important role to play in shaping the Kennedy administration's policies during the Laotian crisis. The responses of each country to this crisis also reveal that neither Harold Macmillan nor Charles de Gaulle were overly concerned by the Cold War nature of the conflict, and had much more self-serving reasons to try and steer American policy towards their preferred outcome. Informed by their country's experience as colonial powers and much more worried about the threat of communism in Europe than in the third world, both of them approached the situation in a very pragmatic way rather than view the conflict in Laos as part of larger trend of communist aggression.

Throughout much of the period, the United States pursued a dual track policy towards the Laotian crisis, simultaneously planning for a potential military operation while at the same time exploring the possibility of a negotiated settlement. European scepticism towards the military option eventually steered Washington towards the latter option. Archival sources reveal that both of the European allies believed an American military intervention would be a tremendous mistake.[8] The British were willing to support intervention, however reluctantly, believing that they needed to preserve their relationship with the new American president, and mindful that they might need a quid pro quo from the United States in Western New Guinea. The French, drawing from their experience as the previous colonial power in the area, tried more vigorously to guide the Kennedy administration away from intervention. The advice given to the Kennedy administration by both allies eventually steered the United States away from a military solution.

In order to fully understand how a transatlantic diplomatic dialogue helped shape American policies towards Laos, it is necessary to consider the context of Kennedy's relationship with Europe throughout his administration. The election of John F. Kennedy to the White House in 1960 caused some apprehension on the other side of the Atlantic. Both French and British decision makers were unsure of what to make of the young American president. After eight years of the Eisenhower administration, Richard Nixon was a better known entity to America's allies. Officials in Paris and London wondered: would the new president be able to forge a working relationship with them?

France had the most reason to worry. During his short tenure in the American Senate, Kennedy had managed to make a strong negative impression on the French government. In 1957, he had given a speech on France's Algerian policy that was very critical of both France's policies and those of the Eisenhower administration.[9] Considering how sensitive

successive French administrations were about the Algerian question, Kennedy's election was bound to lead to some apprehension. Kennedy recognised this as a potential problem, and as early as November 1960, the president-elect had sent word to France that he wanted de Gaulle to know that his views had evolved since his 1957 speech on Algeria and that he now thought France should find its own solution to the Algerian problem.[10]

Despite these reassurances, Franco-American relations proved problematic during Kennedy's administration. Disagreements occurred on almost all aspects of the relationship. The most important of these had to do with France's decision to develop an independent nuclear deterrent and its desire to reform the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Both of these issues first came to the fore during the Eisenhower administration, but they peaked in the 1960s. Worried that the United States would not defend Europe from a Soviet nuclear attack, not wishing to "trade New York for Paris", and seeking the great power status associated with a nuclear arsenal, France launched a nuclear program in 1957, before de Gaulle came to power. The first French nuclear tests, however, came in 1960. The Kennedy administration, worried about nuclear proliferation, disapproved of these French efforts and tried in various ways to discourage them.[11] In return, de Gaulle forbade the United States to station American nuclear warheads on French territory, a decision which caused tremendous tension in the alliance.

The other major stressor in Franco-American relations was de Gaulle's continuing insistence on expanding the scope of NATO and on "tripartism". He first informed the United States and Britain of this in a 1958 memorandum, which outlined France's plan for a tripartite directorate, composed of France, Britain and the United States, which would consult on world issues.[12] Fearing that other members of the Alliance would take umbrage at being led this way, neither Britain nor the U.S. was particularly keen to reform NATO in this manner. The French leader was also dissatisfied with the way in which NATO forces were integrated under a single command, led by an American general. This led de Gaulle to oppose integrating the French air force into NATO and to eventually withdraw France's Mediterranean fleet from NATO's command structure.

Still, despite all of these disagreements, Laos was one area in which France and the United States collaborated closely. French Ambassador Hervé Alphand offered a summary of Franco-American relations during the Kennedy administration in which he lamented the many disagreements he witnessed while at the same time offering the opinion that Laos was the one exception, the one time when American policy makers had been willing to listen to and follow advice from across the Atlantic.[13]

In Britain, similar uncertainties about the future of transatlantic relations were apparent. Harold Macmillan had enjoyed a very close relationship with Eisenhower, whom he had known since the Second World War. It was not certain that the close Anglo-American relationship, which Macmillan had managed to repair following the Suez fiasco, would continue under the new administration. Macmillan's worries about the future of Anglo-American relations were quickly alleviated, however. Macmillan and Kennedy met multiple times during the president's first year in the White House, and the special relationship seemed unaffected by the change in American leadership. By December of that first year, the prime minister would proudly report to his cabinet that his recent meeting with Kennedy in Bermuda was successful, that they agreed on most issues and that he was "increasingly impressed by the president's ability and candour". Macmillan announced to his cabinet that, "this meeting had confirmed his impression that we had succeeded in establishing with the new administration in the United States a sound basis of understanding and co-operation".[14]

Certainly there were tense moments in the relationship, developing into what historian Nigel Ashton describes as a "crisis of interdependence". This was most notably brought on by Kennedy's decision to cancel the Skybolt missile program, thus undermining Britain's efforts at developing an effective, independent, nuclear deterrent. Despite this and other disagreements, President Kennedy and Prime Minister Macmillan enjoyed a remarkable degree of cooperation and consultation throughout the period.[15]

On the U.S. side, Kennedy, more so than either Eisenhower before him or Johnson afterwards, believed in the need for the United States to cooperate closely with its Western European partners. Convinced that his country could not stand up to the Soviet Union on its own, his administration often talked of "burden sharing" with the Europeans and used emotive language such as "grand design" and "Atlantic partnership". Still, this cooperation was very much predicated on the United States as the leader of the Alliance, and the "grand design" was meant to keep Europe tied closely to the United States, with Washington firmly in the driver's seat.[16]

These ideas led Kennedy to look across the Atlantic for support when confronted with the Laotian crisis. The United Sates recognised that France maintained a residual influence over Laos from its days as the region's colonial power. The end of France's formal control over the countries that composed the former French Indochina did not instantaneously end its power in the region. The United States government

was fully aware of the political, economic, and cultural influence that France retained in the region.[17]

Although the Laotian crisis peaked during Kennedy's tenure in the White House, Franco-American consultations about the situation had begun under his predecessor. Although the Eisenhower administration and the French government did not always see eye to eye about Laos, American officials sought French advice and support in this matter. As late as 2 January 1961, shortly before the Kennedy team took over, Eisenhower sent a personal letter to de Gaulle, telling him that, although France and the United States had not always agreed on the course to follow in the region, it was clear to him that the two countries were united and resolute in their opposition to the "Sino-Soviet menace" and that it was time to show the other side that they were in agreement. To do otherwise would seem weak and, the Americans believed, give the enemy an opening.[18]

The Kennedy administration's willingness to consult with, and take advice from, the French government about what was quickly becoming a deteriorating situation in Southeast Asia was thus not unprecedented. What changed, however, was that as the forces of the Pathet Lao advanced, the military situation in Laos escalated and American decision makers began to fear that the whole country might be lost. Clearly worried about the future of Laos, and by extension about all of Southeast Asia, the new American administration wasted no time in consulting extensively with France about how to proceed. The subject was discussed at length on 23 January during the first meeting between French Ambassador Hervé Alphand and Dean Rusk, the new Secretary of State.[19]

Informed by their experience of fighting a brutal colonial war in the region, the French regarded any kind of military intervention in Southeast Asia as unwise and unproductive. Following the end of the Second World War, France, gradually gaining U.S. support, sought to regain control over its Indochinese colonies, which Japan had occupied. This brought them into conflict with local communist supported independence movements such as the Vietminh and the Pathet Lao. From 1945 until 1954, the French army waged a costly and bloody guerrilla campaign in Indochina, a conflict that cost over one hundred thousand French lives and ultimately ended in a humiliating defeat.[20] This hard learned lesson influenced French foreign minister Maurice Couve de Murville, who believed that the United States stood very little chance of success in any military enterprise in the region. Instead, the solution that the French advocated was a diplomatic settlement, in which Laos would become independent and neutral in the Cold War and be governed by a coalition government

including communist elements.[21] He did, however, acknowledge that this solution was not perfect because it would be impossible to keep elements hostile to the West, such as the Pathet Lao, out of power. Pragmatically, he also observed that securing Soviet cooperation was not only necessary, but unavoidable since they were the ones supporting the insurgents.

The Kennedy administration seemed receptive to France's ideas for settling the conflict in Laos. This is at odds with the president's tough Cold Warrior rhetoric and indicates strategic flexibility. Following one of Ambassador Alphand's meetings with Kennedy, he sent word back to Paris that the Undersecretary of State for Asia, J. Graham Parsons, had briefed the French Embassy on the administration's new policy towards Laos. He reported that the ultimate goal of the American government was to make Laos into a neutral and demilitarized state. A commission of neutrals composed of Cambodia, Burma and perhaps Malaya would be established to ensure this neutrality. American policy, it seemed, had moved away from Eisenhower's belief that it was imperative to support the anti-communist forces and inched closer to the French position. However, this policy was to be made public only through a declaration by the King of Laos and without any direct approach to Moscow, which the French favoured.[22] The French, unlike the Americans, did not see the situation in Laos within a Cold War framework, and believed that there was more to be gained by including the Soviets than by excluding them.

Although their respective positions had moved closer together than under Eisenhower, there were still important differences in the way both countries viewed the Laotian crisis. The French government was worried that, although the Kennedy administration had rallied to its plan of making Laos a neutral, demilitarized country, it still had not acknowledged that this was an impossible task to accomplish without including the Pathet Lao in government. Further, they were convinced that any attempt at a truce in Laos that was not worked out in concert with the Soviet Union would be doomed to fail.[23] Meanwhile, the Kennedy administration was still toying with a military solution to the problem. Worried about the Soviets taking advantage of the situation in Laos, President Kennedy probed Alphand about how the French would react to a SEATO military intervention against any future gains by the communist forces. Alphand predictably let the president know that France opposed any military solution.[24] This would be a recurring feature of the relationship: the United States would sometimes return to the military solution and ask France to support it; the French would then oppose it. The experience of the French Indochina war made military support impossible.

Franco-American consultations about the Laotian situation had so far been conducted through traditional diplomatic channels. Kennedy and de Gaulle took another important step towards closer coordination of the French and American diplomacies when they began directly addressing the issue in an exchange of letters in March 1961, which allowed them to clarify their respective positions to one another. Kennedy started the exchange by accepting even more of the French policy, acknowledging that it was necessary to work through the Soviet Union. Thanking the French for acting as intermediaries between Washington and Moscow over this matter, Kennedy clearly tried to impress upon de Gaulle the fact that he favoured a peaceful solution to the crisis. However, he was also hoping to gain French agreement to an eventual military solution in the event of a breakdown of diplomatic efforts.[25] De Gaulle responded by expressing his preference for an international commission that would guarantee the neutrality of Laos.[26] He then proceeded to firmly oppose any military solution through SEATO. Clearly wishing to impress upon de Gaulle his willingness to collaborate with France, Kennedy subsequently sent the French president a final letter on the matter in which he concluded that there were no important differences between the French and Americans on the matter, "indeed I would conclude that we are in general agreement on the need for a cease fire and the convening of the International Control Commission and an international conference on the subject of Laos".[27]

The next step, a face-to-face meeting of the two presidents, soon followed during a visit Kennedy paid to de Gaulle in Paris in the spring of 1961. Laos featured prominently in the discussions between the two heads of state and their foreign policy specialists. In those meetings, Kennedy admitted to de Gaulle that the United States had mishandled the situation in Laos in the past by openly supporting the Royalist government militarily and was now faced with a very difficult problem. While de Gaulle said he did not wish to harp on the past, he proceeded to do just that and argued once again against a military intervention and in favour of a diplomatic solution that would make Laos "more or less" neutral.[28] This opposition to a military solution was a recurring feature of the talks between the two men. In a subsequent meeting, de Gaulle again explained that if the United States decided to intervene militarily France would not join in the effort and, clearly informed by the experience of the French Indochina war, stressed that he considered the region the worst possible terrain to fight a war in every aspect.[29]

Eventually, Kennedy stopped trying to convince de Gaulle to participate in a hypothetical future military operation in the area. Still, he asked that this position be kept quiet because the mere possibility that the United

States and its British and French allies might chose a military option would strengthen the West's diplomatic position in future negotiations over the fate of Laos by making the Soviet leaders more careful in their actions.[30] If France's unwillingness to support the United States had been made public, he argued, it would undermine the Kennedy administration's diplomatic efforts by reducing the credibility of an American military threat.

While by now the United States had rallied to the preferred French policy towards Laos, it is clear that they did not share a common assessment of the importance of opposing communist aggression in the region. De Gaulle believed that Laos was "an unhappy country with no unity, either political or national; it is, in fact, a nonentity which cannot be built up into anything at all".[31] His opposition to any kind of military intervention stemmed, in part, from the belief that Laos was not a viable state. In contrast, Kennedy made it quite clear during the discussion that he believed that should Laos fall to the communists, there would be grave repercussions in neighbouring countries. He went as far as to mention Turkey as the potential last domino to fall in such an eventuality.[32] Considering how far Turkey is from Laos, this may have been hyperbole on the part of the American president, but it remains certain that he was far more worried about the consequences of Laos falling to Communism than de Gaulle.

Consultation with its allies about the Laotian crisis was clearly a salient feature of the Kennedy administration's policies, along with the need to present a united front to the Communist bloc. Thus, Kennedy wished to consult with more than just the French. Whenever American and French officials met to discuss Laos, it was made clear that French and British support was important to the United States government.[33] What, then, of the British? They had better relations with the United States than the French did at this time. Macmillan himself was extremely pro-American and closely consulted with both Eisenhower and Kennedy on a wide range of matters of common interest. While Macmillan was at first worried that his close relationship with Eisenhower would not continue under Kennedy, he soon managed to develop a satisfactory working relationship with the younger man. This co-operation included Laos.

Laos' proximity to a number of Commonwealth countries made it strategically important for Britain. The United Kingdom's SEATO membership guaranteed that it would play an important part in any deliberations about Laos. Further, the British experience in successfully fighting a communist insurgency in Malaya throughout the 1950s gave their opinion special weight. These considerations led the Kennedy

administration to believe that any military solution to the Laotian problem would need to involve Macmillan's Britain. Dean Rusk, in an "off the record meeting" with the president and key members of the administration explained that an intervention which would "lay a foundation for negotiation" required the British to change their position and agree to have a SEATO force positioned in Thailand.[34] Not only were the British useful in the event of a military intervention, but they were also seen by the Kennedy administration as a convenient mouthpiece through which they could communicate their position to the Soviets. After all, the British and Soviet foreign ministers were the co-chairs of the International Control Commission on Laos, established following the Geneva accords of 1954 and charged with implementing and monitoring the agreements reached there.

The British were, like the French, convinced that military intervention, whether or not it was organised under the auspices of SEATO, was an unwise course of action. When the Macmillan government was confronted with the gains of Communist forces in Laos, in January 1961, the prime minister decided to try to convince the Americans to pursue a political solution.[35] In March, the British agreed to put a concrete proposal to the United States. Lord Home, the foreign secretary, apprised the cabinet of the worsening situation in Laos. General Phoumi and Prince Souvanna Phouma were no longer talking, Phouma had even left the country, and the Pathet Lao was gaining ground thanks to Russian weapons. In response, the Macmillan government suggested a "four-pronged proposal" to the Americans. It involved first a renewed meeting of the International Control Commission in Delhi; second, a joint appeal of the foreign minister, along with his Soviet counterpart, as co-chairmen of the commission, for a cease fire; third, the commission would then announce when the cease fire had been observed. Lastly, an international conference would be convened.[36]

While the British government seemed to be aligned with the French in their effort to lobby for a political solution to the crisis, they disagreed with them on a very important point: they were prepared to commit military forces if the situation worsened to the point of making such a settlement impossible. By the end of March 1961, the Macmillan government had been informed by the Kennedy administration of operational plans that called for a military intervention in Laos with the goal of controlling a fifty mile radius around the capital and preventing a Communist takeover. Presented with this possibility, the cabinet debated whether or not to try and discourage the United States from such plans. Concerned about the reaction of neighbouring Commonwealth countries,

such as India and Malaya, who were likely to strongly criticise such an intervention, the British remained convinced that it was the wrong path to take. Yet, they were mindful of the instability the fall of Laos might bring to neighbouring states. The fate of Thailand, for example, appeared worrisome. Ultimately, though, Macmillan came to the conclusion that, as a last resort, they would agree to support whatever position the United States took.[37]

One reason why Britain was reluctant to openly oppose United States policy towards Laos was that Macmillan was mindful of the fact that he might need American support in Western New Guinea.[38] The status of the Dutch possession was important to the British because of its proximity to Commonwealth territory. When the Dutch started to prepare the area for independence, Indonesia threatened to take it over. The perceived expansionism by Indonesian President Sukarno so close to Commonwealth allies in Australia and New Guinea was very worrisome. Fears about this influenced British thinking about Laos. Above all, Britain wished to avoid seeing armed conflict spreading in the region.[39] If Britain wanted the United States to support them in Western New Guinea, they could not afford to antagonize them in Laos.

Throughout these deliberations, the importance of the Commonwealth to British thinking remains clear. Macmillan reassured his cabinet that he would send a message to the United States stressing the disadvantages of intervention and the need to account for how nearby Commonwealth countries would react.[40] They then agreed on a course of action, that if the United States decided to ultimately intervene militarily, the British government would support them, "though it would be necessary to agree what form our support should take bearing in mind the importance of the attitude of other Commonwealth countries". The American plan involved securing a fifty mile perimeter around Vientiane, the capital, which would permit the King of Laos to remain in the country. This would then "encourage the neighbouring countries to stand firm against communist infiltration", and stop the spread of communism in the region.[41] Once military planning started, this concern for the Commonwealth remained a salient feature of the cabinet's discussions. They made sure that any planning would be made in coordination with the Australian and New Zealand governments, and that Pakistan would be kept informed.[42]

Although by the spring of 1961 the British seemed to have reconciled themselves to the possibility of a military intervention, they were clearly ambivalent about doing it through SEATO. They believed that a unilateral U.S. intervention carried less risk of having the conflict spill over to other countries. From a political and public relations perspective, however, they

also felt it would be easier to justify their intervention by describing it as a treaty obligation.[43] The main difference between the French and the British outlook on the Laotian situation, then, was that the Macmillan government seemed willing, however reluctantly, to intervene militarily, or to at least acquiesce in a unilateral U.S. military intervention to prevent a communist takeover.

By June 1961, the situation seemed dire. Since no progress had been made in Geneva, it seemed unlikely that the Laotian princes would be able to come to an agreement in Zurich, and hostilities seemed likely to resume. If this were to happen, the British thought it unlikely that a SEATO military response could be avoided.[44] This situation led the Minister of Defence to consider pre-positioning heavy equipment in Thailand for use by a Commonwealth brigade in case fighting broke out again and they needed to do more than counter insurgency, which would follow a similar move by the U.S. The British Cabinet decided to make preliminary arrangements and consult with Australia, New Zealand and Thailand, but to wait before taking a final decision because of the costs involved.[45]

The British policy seemed to be based on the hope that the United States would realise how bleak the situation was, but the Macmillan government was ultimately willing to follow the American lead. In a way, the British got their wish. The Kennedy administration recognised that their British ally was very reluctant to commit to a military intervention, even though they were less adamant about their position than the French. In April 1961, the task force on Laos informed Kennedy of various obstacles to a SEATO intervention and cited the British attitude as one of the major problems.[46] By that summer, these concerns over Britain's actual willingness to support a military operation were voiced even more openly when the president and his top security advisors admitted that the British seemed interested in carrying out their military plans only if the ceasefire in Laos was "rudely broken", and even then only for defensive purposes.[47] By this point, it was obvious to the Americans they might not even be able to count on their most faithful ally should they decide to respond to the situation in Laos by sending a military force.

Throughout their deliberations about Laos, the Macmillan government remained convinced of their ability to affect the outcome. In December 1961, when it started to seem likely that a possible settlement might be achieved in Laos, the Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home expressed the belief that "it would be largely due to the patience and skill of the British and American representatives at the Geneva Conference".[48] This assessment is open to debate, but the Macmillan government certainly impacted the Kennedy administration's policies, if only because their lack

of enthusiasm for a military solution helped steer the Kennedy administration away from such intervention.

Ultimately, the Laotian crisis would be temporarily settled along the lines suggested by France and Britain at the July 1962 Geneva conference, which led to an agreement between the United States, France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and China. Laos would be made into a neutral, demilitarized country governed by a coalition of royalists, neutralists and communists and forbidden from taking sides in the Cold War. This solution was a return to the Geneva accords of 1954 and avoided the need for the American military intervention that its European allies believed so misguided.

By internationalising the history of the American response to the Laotian crisis of 1961, we get a much more complete picture of what drove the American response to what they perceived as a grave communist threat. Throughout the crisis, the dual track policy followed by Washington gradually moved away from a military solution towards a negotiated settlement. Both France and Britain influenced the Kennedy administration's Laotian policies. France did so by clearly opposing any kind of military intervention and Britain by being very obviously reluctant to follow the Americans in, despite not being as adamant as the French. Faced with this European reluctance, the Kennedy administration came to accept that a military intervention was an unwise course of action. Both European allies had their own motives for trying to change American policies, and neither of them was particularly driven by the Cold War nature of the crisis. The French were informed by their previous experience in the region, and the British were more concerned about the impact the American response would have on the surrounding Commonwealth countries.

Unfortunately for the future of American policy in Southeast Asia, the Laotian solution resulted in a fragile solution that broke down with renewed military offensives by the Pathet Lao against the neutralist and royalist forces in Laos in 1963. After this, the United States returned to considering sending increased military aid to the anti-communist forces. Still, despite how short-lived the "neutral Laos" solution proved to be, it is a clear example of the transatlantic diplomatic dialogue shaping American policy.

Notes

[1] See Kenneth Conboy, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War In Laos* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 1995); Stephen E. Pelz, "When Do I Have Time to Think? John F. Kennedy, Roger Hilsman, and the Laotian crisis of 1962", *Diplomatic History* 3, no. 2 (1979), 215-230; Roger Warner, *Back fire: the CIA's secret war in Laos and its link to the war in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

[2] Edmund F. Wehrle, "A Good, Bad Deal: John F. Kennedy, W. Averell Harriman, and the Neutralization of Laos, 1961-1962", *The Pacific Historical Review* 67, no. 3 (August 1998), 349-377.

[3] For one exception which examines the impact of China on John F. Kennedy's response to Laos and uses the crisis as a way to better understand his relationship with China, see: Noam Kochavi, "Limited Accommodation, Perpetuated Conflict: Kennedy, China, and the Laos Crisis, 1961-1963", *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 1 (January 2002), 95-135. For a brief mention of the British position see: Andrew Holt, "Lord Home and Anglo–American Relations, 1961–1963", *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 16, no. 4 (2005), 699-722. For an early study of the French position, unfortunately written before key sources were released, see: Marianna P. Sullivan. *France's Vietnam Policy: A Study in French-American Relations*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978).

[4] Quoted in Seth Jacobs, "'No Place to Fight a War': Laos and the Evolution of U.S Policy Toward Vietnam, 1954-1963" in Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National and Transnational Perspectives.* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 59.

[5] Quoted in Ibid.

[6] See for example Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 298; David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2000), 39-57.

[7] Seth Jacobs, "No Place to Fight a War" in Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 45-66.

[8] Examples abound in the records of the Kennedy administration, the Macmillan government's cabinet files and the French diplomatic documents about the crisis.

[9] M. Alphand, Ambassadeur de France à Washington, à M. Pineau, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères. Washington, 29 juin 1957. *Document Diplomatiques Français* (hereafter DDF), 1957 v. I. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1990), 975-977.

[10] M. Alphand, Ambassadeur de France à Washington, à M. Couve de Murville, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères. Washington, 24 Novembre 1960, DDF 1960 v. II, 626-627.

[11] The McMahon Act, which precluded the United States from sharing its nuclear technology, provided the justification for not helping France in its quest for nuclear weapons. When it became clear that this would not stop the French, the Kennedy administration proposed the creation of the Multilateral force, which was seen by the French as a way to keep their force under American control.