

Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia, 1961–1965

Britain, the United States and
the Creation of Malaysia

Matthew Jones



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1 The Kennedy Administration, Indonesia and the resolution of the West Irian crisis, 1961–1962

Improving the state of relations with Jakarta occupied an important place in the foreign policy agenda of the Kennedy Administration. Indonesia's size, possession of natural resources, including oil, rubber and tin, strategic location astride lines of communication in the south west Pacific, and the fact that it was home to a significant level of US commercial investment, meant that in the late 1950s and early 1960s the state was often seen as a key prize in the Cold War competition for influence in the non-aligned world. The evident interest that the Soviet Union, under Khrushchev's energetic new leadership, exhibited during this period in cultivating ties with Jakarta, necessarily seemed to enhance Indonesia's importance to American eyes. Sukarno's visit to Moscow in September 1956 was accompanied by the extension of a \$100 million long-term credit, while in early 1958 an arms deal totalling \$250 million was negotiated, with Poland and Czechoslovakia acting as Soviet intermediaries. President K. I. Voroshilov's state visit to Jakarta in May 1957 had been followed up, even more significantly, by a ten-day tour of Indonesia by Khrushchev in February 1960.¹ When put alongside other initiatives in Russian policy during this period, many American observers came to the conclusion that a Soviet economic offensive was under way in the Third World, with Indonesia one of the prime targets.

Trends within Indonesia's own complex polity did little to reassure the Americans that external Communist influence would not find a welcome audience. The PKI had managed to further boost its domestic standing by its support for the central government during the Outer Island rebellion of 1958, while it was prepared to back Sukarno's own attempts to dismantle the Western-style parliamentary system that seemed such a

¹ See Steven I. Levine, 'Breakthrough to the East: Soviet Asian Policy in the 1950s', in Warren I. Cohen and Akira Iriye (eds.), *The Great Powers in East Asia, 1953–1960* (New York, 1990), 304; Justus M. van der Kroef, 'Soviet and Chinese Influence in Indonesia', in Alvin Z. Rubinstein (ed.), *Soviet and Chinese Influence in the Third World* (London, 1975), 54–5.

divisive source of Indonesia's problems. Indeed, as Sukarno moved more decisively in 1959 to implement his vision of 'Guided Democracy', by returning to the 1945 Constitution which gave him greatly increased executive powers and by acting as the overall arbitrator between the competing forces in Indonesian society, he also recognized that the PKI served as a useful and necessary counterweight to the potentially dominating influence of the Army.²

By the late 1950s, Washington's approach to Indonesia was marked by ambiguity and uncertainty. The Eisenhower Administration's efforts to undermine Sukarno's regime in 1958 through support for the Outer Island rebels was a constant background influence throughout the period, serving to sow suspicions in Indonesian minds of ultimate American intentions (it is worth noting in this regard that some American policy-makers continued into 1959 to toy with the notion of reviving covert backing for the remnants of the PRRI, while dissident groups were still at large as late as 1961). Although, as we have seen, the Eisenhower Administration had turned to providing limited amounts of military assistance to the Indonesian armed forces in the wake of the rebellion's failure, and in an effort to encourage anti-Communist feeling within the higher echelons of the Army, Jakarta still bridled at the inadequacies of American policy. Compared to the aid now coming from the Communist bloc, the military equipment offered by the Americans seemed meagre. Moreover, in the wider realm of American public opinion, Sukarno enjoyed a generally low reputation in the media due to the increasingly personalized nature of his rule, his good relations with the PKI, and what were seen as his dubious personal morals.³ From his own point of view, Sukarno felt personally slighted that Eisenhower omitted Indonesia from his itinerary when visiting Asia both at the end of 1959 and in June 1960 (and this following repeated invitations and the premium the Indonesian President was known to place on personal forms of diplomacy).⁴ However, of overriding importance in the relationship was the fact that the United States could provide no assistance in persuading the Dutch to relinquish their hold over West Irian. The issue of recovering West Irian had become the central preoccupation of Indonesia's foreign policy by the late 1950s, and an emotive symbol of patriotic sentiment on the internal

² See Legge, *Sukarno*, 301–16.

³ Dulles, for one, could never quite seem to overcome his distaste for the Indonesian President's fondness for a variety of female company, see e.g. Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion*, 77.

⁴ See Jakarta to Department of State (DOS), 18 November 1959, *FRUS, 1958–1960, XVII*, 450–51.

political scene. Sukarno maintained that the Indonesian revolution was incomplete while West Irian remained in alien hands, and the belligerence of the rhetoric surrounding Jakarta's demands steadily increased in line with Dutch intransigence; meanwhile, the new supplies of arms from the Communist bloc, including advanced jet aircraft and naval vessels, also opened up the prospect that force might eventually be used to resolve the claim.⁵

The dispute over West Irian raised some awkward dilemmas for the United States. As early as October 1952, Dean Acheson had made clear that Washington was not going to become involved with the argument, and this position of 'neutrality' was maintained under Eisenhower. The relationship with the Netherlands and the need to preserve solidarity within NATO was accorded a high priority, and certainly Dulles, for all the distractions of crises in the Middle and Far East during his tenure as Secretary of State, viewed European considerations as fundamental.⁶ With the reputation and weight of the State Department's Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs relatively weak in this period, and continual Dutch pressure for some clear indication of US support in the event of an Indonesian use of force (accompanied by powerful backing from the Australians for a firm stand, who feared for their own position in Papua New Guinea), it was unlikely that the Administration would become a convert to Indonesian arguments. Washington's preferred position of non-involvement was, nonetheless, inherently problematic, as Jakarta saw commitment to the status quo as, in effect, support for the Dutch position. Moreover, the military assistance now being offered to Indonesia was deeply disturbing to both Dutch and Australian officials, who could only greet with scepticism Indonesian assurances that the arms they received from Western sources would not be used for aggressive purposes. Hence Dulles, and his successor from April 1959, Christian Herter, were not prepared to sanction an expanded programme of arms sales beyond those items deemed necessary for internal security, or to make a long-term commitment to the Indonesian military.⁷

For US officials in both the Far East Bureau of the State Department and the Pentagon concerned to improve relations with Indonesia, and for the US Ambassador in Jakarta, Howard P. Jones, Washington's refusal to move on the West Irian issue was intensely frustrating. Convinced

⁵ Legge, *Sukarno*, 248–50, 291–2.

⁶ See e.g. Richard H. Immerman (ed.), *The Diplomacy of John Foster Dulles* (Princeton, 1990), 43, 79–80, 235, 279–80.

⁷ See e.g. Frederick P. Bunnell, 'The Kennedy Initiatives in Indonesia, 1962–1963', unpublished PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1969, 61–3.

that the Dutch would inevitably have to leave the territory, Jones argued:

Colonialism is finished and the longer we continue [to] support small western enclaves in Asia the longer we delay winning Asians to our cause, the more we intensify [the] danger of major explosion over minor issue. Even if it be argued that transfer [of] West Irian to Indonesia is to substitute Asian for western colonialism, [the] fact is that it is combination of white west over colored east that Asians are fighting, rather than imperialism or colonialism per se.⁸

Despite such advice, neutrality was maintained as Dutch–Indonesian tensions climbed throughout 1960, with Jakarta breaking off diplomatic relations with The Hague in August, while private affirmations were somewhat grudgingly repeated to the Dutch that US political and logistical support would be provided in the event of an Indonesian attack.⁹ Faced with their continuing refusal to back Indonesia’s claim to the territory, Sukarno would pointedly remark that the US was ‘like [a] tight rope walker trying to balance its support of [the] West in Europe with support [of the] Asian nations in the East’.¹⁰ In contrast to the United States, the Soviet Union could offer the Indonesians unreserved diplomatic and propaganda support over West Irian, as well as generous supplies of military aid, while adding to their anti-imperialist credibility in the developing world. At the end of December 1960, in the final few weeks of the Eisenhower Administration, the NSC met to discuss and approve a new draft statement on policy towards Indonesia. This paper, NSC 6023, held that ‘domestic instability, burgeoning Sino-Soviet Bloc economic and military aid, and substantial local Communist strength may lead to a Communist takeover or to a policy increasingly friendly towards the Sino-Soviet Bloc on the part of whatever regime is in power’. There would need to be a ‘vigorous US effort to prevent these contingencies’. Yet there was no recommendation to shift away from neutrality over West Irian, despite the admission: ‘Not to support Indonesia on this issue is to leave this key gambit to the Communist Bloc.’¹¹

The clearest sign that the Soviet Union was moving to bolster its position with Jakarta came at the very time when the newly elected President Kennedy was about to enter office. In early January 1961, General Nasution, the Indonesian Minister of Defence and Army Chief of Staff, along with Dr Subandrio, the Foreign Minister, visited Moscow where they were received by Khrushchev and signed agreements for the

⁸ Jakarta to DOS, 23 January 1959, *FRUS, 1958–1960, XVII*, 323–5.

⁹ See e.g. Jones, *Indonesia*, 189–90.

¹⁰ Jakarta to DOS, 17 November 1959, *FRUS, 1958–1960, XVII*, 449.

¹¹ NSC 6023, 19 December 1960, *ibid.*, 571–83; and see memorandum of discussion at 472nd mtg of the NSC, 29 December 1960, *ibid.*, 590–2.

purchase of a further \$400 million of military hardware, announcing that this was a response to the Dutch military build-up around West Irian.¹² This was a particularly bitter blow as Nasution was a strong anti-Communist and seen by US officials as an important bulwark against the domestic influence of the PKI. While the implications of the arms deal were being digested by interested observers in Washington, on 6 January Khrushchev delivered his now-famous speech at the Institute of Marxism–Leninism in Moscow, where he talked of the anti-colonial revolutions convulsing Asia and Africa (and the triumph of Castro's insurgency in Cuba) as marking a pivotal stage in the Cold War, with new post-colonial leaders emerging to reject the continuing tutelage and example of the West, turning instead to support from the Soviet Union and its Communist ideals. While the concept of peaceful coexistence with the capitalist West would continue to govern Soviet policies, Moscow would do all it could to further revolutionary tendencies in the Third World through the provision of economic and military assistance and by vigorous diplomatic and propaganda support for wars of national liberation that were still ongoing against the forces of Western imperialism. Khrushchev looked forward with overwhelming confidence to the coming ideological and political struggle on this new and promising stage. Evidently impressed with this statement of Soviet attitudes, Kennedy had Khrushchev's speech distributed among his foreign policy advisers with an exhortation for them to study it closely; the new President would regard meeting the Communist challenge in the Third World as the principal task facing the West for the 1960s.¹³

One of the most trenchant criticisms put forward by Kennedy of the previous Republican Administration had been its inability to respond to the needs and concerns of the developing world, and the way its very public rejection of the concept of neutrality in the Cold War had done much to alienate opinion among newly independent states. Rather than emphasize adherence to regional and Western-led alliances, in December 1959 Kennedy maintained that the trend towards countries taking a neutralist stance in foreign policy was 'inevitable'. 'The desire to be independent and free carries with it the desire not to become engaged as a satellite of the Soviet Union or too closely allied with the United States', the then Senator had argued. 'We have to live with that, and if neutrality

¹² *FRUS, 1961–1963, vol. XXIII, Southeast Asia* (Washington, 1994), 308, n1.

¹³ See M. R. Beschloss, *Kennedy v. Khrushchev: The Crisis Years, 1960–1963* (London, 1991), 60–4; Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 274–6. As late as the following January, the President was still describing Khrushchev's remarks to an NSC meeting as 'possibly one of the most important speeches of the decade'. Kennedy comments to 496th mtg of the NSC, 18 January 1962, *FRUS, 1961–1963, vol. VIII, National Security Policy* (Washington, 1996), 240.

is the result of a concentration on internal problems, raising the standard of living of the people and so on, particularly in the underdeveloped countries, I would accept that . . .'¹⁴ Many members of the new Kennedy Administration assumed that in future competition with the Communist bloc, the United States would need to work with the changes that were transforming the Third World, and to open up a sympathetic dialogue with regimes that had thrown off old imperial controls and where hostility to excessive Western influence often went hand in hand with the anti-colonial struggle.¹⁵ This apparent willingness to tolerate diversity was intended to be a key component in the Kennedy strategy of winning over the allegiance of what the President had called in the Senate in 1957 the 'uncommitted millions in Asia and Africa'.¹⁶ Speaking to students at Berkeley in March 1962, Kennedy asserted that 'diversity and independence, far from being opposed to the American conception of world order, represent the very essence of our view of the future of the world'.¹⁷ Leaders of the non-aligned world were to be given generous and understanding assistance and aid, while being gently coaxed into US patterns of economic development and into the anti-Communist camp. Over the long term, Kennedy believed that the encouragement of pluralism and strong national independence would serve US interests, and would in fact be the most effective response to the monolithic vision it was charged that Communism represented.

Yet there were significant qualifications to this vision of tolerating diversity. In his inaugural address, Kennedy sounded a note of warning:

To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect them to be supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom – and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.¹⁸

As in the 1950s, the Kennedy Administration viewed its relations with the developing world through the pervasive prism of the all-consuming struggle against Communism; on the part of the President himself, both from personal inclination and from his awareness of what the American

¹⁴ Interview conducted 9 December 1959, see John F. Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace* (New York, 1960), 218.

¹⁵ See e.g. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 446–7.

¹⁶ Senate speech, 2 July 1957, in Kennedy, *Strategy of Peace*, 66.

¹⁷ Address to University of California at Berkeley, 23 March 1962, *The Public Papers of the Presidents: John F. Kennedy, 1962* (Washington, 1963), 265. On the background and drafting of the Berkeley speech see, Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 534–9.

¹⁸ Inaugural address, 20 January 1961, *The Public Papers of the Presidents: John F. Kennedy, 1961* (Washington, 1962), 1.

public would tolerate, there was no desire to deviate from the assumptions that had underpinned all US policy since the enunciation of the Truman Doctrine. As one noted critic of the period has warned us: 'One can easily get caught up in the eloquent phrasing and noble appeals to human uplift and overlook contradictions between word and deed or the coercive components of American foreign policy.'¹⁹ Instability in the Third World, or evidence of major social or political change, was all too readily seen as evidence of external Communist influence or intrigue, and as a possible challenge that necessitated a vigorous response. Washington still found it difficult to regard local regimes as anything but pieces to be moved and manipulated by their Soviet or American masters in a global power game, rather than as autonomous actors with their own priorities. In January 1963, the President can be found telling the National Security Council, 'We cannot permit all those who call themselves neutrals to join the Communist bloc. Therefore, we must keep our ties to . . . neutralists even if we do not like many things they do because if we lose them, the balance of power could swing against us.'²⁰ Then again, US officials would frequently complain that 'genuine' national independence was missing in many developing countries. In this world view there were different brands and varieties of neutral, with suspicion and hostility still being reserved for those who maintained friendly ties with Moscow or Beijing. In the wake of the Belgrade conference of non-aligned states in September 1961, Dean Rusk, the US Secretary of State, could be heard to remark, 'It is high time that they decided what side of the Cold War they were on.'²¹ Over Vietnam, Kennedy was irritated at the often isolated position of the United States, stating in one meeting that 'the time had come for neutral nations as well as others to be in support of US policy *publicly* . . . we should aggressively determine which nations are in support of US policy and that these nations should identify themselves'.²²

Throughout the Administration there was also a strong emphasis on the need for the United States to exercise global leadership, McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, memorably explaining that he had 'come to accept what he had learned from Dean Acheson – that, in the final analysis, the United States was the locomotive at the head of mankind, and the rest of the world was the

¹⁹ Thomas G. Paterson, 'Bearing the Burden: a Critical Look at John F. Kennedy's Foreign Policy', *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 54, 2, 1978, 194.

²⁰ Record of 508th mtg of the NSC, 22 January 1963, *FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII*, 460.

²¹ Chester Bowles, *Promises to Keep: My Years in Public Life, 1941–1969* (New York, 1971), 359.

²² Notes on the NSC mtg of 15 November 1961, *FRUS, 1961–1963, vol. I, Vietnam 1961* (Washington, 1988), 610.

caboose'.²³ Doubt and indecision were to be banished, as precise, cool-headed memoranda, based on snap analysis and judgements, or the quantitative data flowing from Robert McNamara's Pentagon machine, were issued by the 'action intellectuals' who came to be associated with the new regime. The United States could not afford to be a passive onlooker,²⁴ and this overwhelming desire for activism (which was supposed to provide a contrast with the alleged lethargy and drift of the Eisenhower Administration) would lead along several uncertain and destructive paths. The desire to assert credibility with allies, and the need to show strength when changes appeared to threaten perceptions of the balance of global power, meant that stability would often be more highly valued than a tolerance of diversity; nowhere was this aversion to change better shown than in regard to Vietnam and Cuba.²⁵ The belief that all problems were capable of solution, given only the application of sufficient expertise and resources, could often result in a disturbing interventionism that did much to limit the independence of many states in the developing world.

Kennedy had initially hoped that the new directions he was hoping to set might come from within the bureaucracy of the State Department. In the final years of the Eisenhower Administration much anxiety had been expressed by commentators (and some participants) over the elaborate and baroque structure of the NSC system, with its network of coordinating committees. To those keen to promote initiative and ideas, the round of endless discussions and approval of long policy papers was cumbersome and stifling, merely serving to excuse inaction and lethargy. Such matters received greater public comment due to the work of Senator Henry M. Jackson's congressional subcommittee on government operations which began its hearings in the summer of 1959. Its critical and influential reports were disseminated from the autumn of 1960, at the moment when President-elect Kennedy was also studying how he should mark a sharp departure from the approach of his predecessor. The Jackson subcommittee made a strong case for pruning back the NSC structure, and putting authority once more into the hands of the State Department, with an emphasis on the importance of forceful personnel at the Assistant Secretary level, heading the Department's regional bureaux.²⁶

²³ Quoted in George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-75* (London, 1979), 74.

²⁴ Note Kennedy's pronouncement in his second State of the Union address in January 1962: '... our Nation is commissioned by history to be either an observer of freedom's failure or the cause of its success', *Public Papers, Kennedy*, 1962, 5.

²⁵ On this point see John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford, 1982), 201-3.

²⁶ See Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 18-25.

The new President took up such ideas in his first month in office, abolishing the Operations Coordinating Board of the NSC, effectively suspending the Planning Board, and investing increased authority, planning and coordination tasks in the State Department. At the same time a slimmed-down NSC Secretariat, under Bundy's direction, would function as a personal advisory staff for the President, while meetings of the full NSC would be kept to a minimum. For an energetic and knowledgeable chief executive such as Kennedy, who liked to rely more on direct, personal communication, the streamlined machinery seemed the best method of dealing with the packed agenda that he confronted.²⁷ However, Kennedy's choice of the conventionally minded and reticent Rusk to lead the State Department proved to be unfortunate. Under the detached guidance of Rusk, the Department's regional bureaux did not generate the fresh thinking and drive that was expected of the New Frontier.²⁸ By the middle of 1961, there was considerable disillusionment at the generally lacklustre performance of the Department across a wide area of policy. On too many occasions, from the Bay of Pigs episode to the Berlin crisis to Vietnam, it seemed that other agencies were playing the lead role in offering advice and developing policy.²⁹ Irrespective of the problems at the State Department, Kennedy was determined to stamp his own imprint on foreign policy. This was increasingly accomplished by the channelling of high-level decision-making and policy discussion through the close retinue of regional experts on Bundy's NSC staff, a group that exuded the youth, vigour and assertiveness that best personified the Kennedy style.³⁰

Over the first year of the Administration some of the conflicts between the glacial thinking present within the State Department, particularly by the Bureau of European Affairs with its inclination not to challenge NATO allies over colonial issues, and the desire of Bundy's staff to forge a new relationship with the developing world, became very apparent over policy towards Indonesia and the West Irian dispute. From Jakarta, Jones tried to catch the mood of the new Administration by arguing that

²⁷ See notes of Secretary of State's daily staff meeting, 14 February 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963, VIII*, 34, and 15n1.

²⁸ On Kennedy Administration personnel and appointments see David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (London, 1972), 4-77; Beschloss, *Kennedy v Khrushchev*, 46, 70-6, 463-5.

²⁹ See Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 34-9; Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 365-6, 384-7. For a stinging contemporary critique, see Galbraith to Kennedy, 15 August 1961, in John K. Galbraith, *Ambassador's Journal* (Boston, 1969), 186-9.

³⁰ On the operation of Kennedy's NSC staff see John Prados, *The Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York, 1991), 99-132, and Robert W. Komer Oral History.

neutrality should be abandoned and a solution developed that was acceptable to the Indonesians. An Indonesian resort to arms, with the possibility that the United States might find itself lending support to the Dutch, would be a disastrous outcome, alienating neutral opinion throughout Asia, and driving Indonesia irretrievably into the waiting arms of the Communists. The Ambassador made clear that Sukarno was 'in well nigh absolute control of [the] destiny of Indonesia for [the] time being' and 'To ignore, snub, punish or attempt to wish away Sukarno are all equally futile pastimes. Like Nasser and Nehru he is there, and we must learn to live with him as a fact of life.' The coldness of the previous Administration and general hostility to Sukarno in the American press meant that he 'believes we not only do not like him but that we are in fact out to get him'. The Ambassador recommended that a personal invitation for Sukarno to visit Washington for talks with the President should be made as soon as possible.³¹

Despite such entreaties, the Secretary of State was inherently sceptical over any move to alter the US stance over West Irian. During the final years of the Truman Administration, Rusk had served as Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, and had shown no predilection to pressure the Dutch in their abortive negotiations with Indonesia in 1950–1 over the territory. With many more immediately pressing problems in early 1961, Rusk was dubious about pursuing ideas that had earlier surfaced in the Far East Bureau over the idea of replacing Dutch rule with a UN trusteeship for West Irian.³² Rusk probably also had domestic considerations in mind. Although not significant in the early part of the year, by late 1961, in the wake of the Belgrade conference, where Indonesia played a prominent role, there was considerable opposition emerging in Congress to the whole notion of extensive foreign aid to neutrals. This opposition would grow more pronounced in the following year and help to convince Rusk, who had been in government during the assaults of the McCarthy years and was acutely conscious of the dangers of losing support within Congress, of the risks in swinging too far to accommodate a regime headed by such a controversial figure as Sukarno.³³

Towards the end of February 1961, Jones had his request of the previous month met, when the State Department confirmed that Kennedy

³¹ Jakarta to DOS, nos. 2154 and 2164, 25 January 1961, 611.98/1–2561, RG 59. Sukarno himself also appears to have been ready to establish a new relationship with Kennedy, attracted by the latter's idealism and earlier criticisms of French colonialism in North Africa, see e.g. Jones, *Indonesia*, 191, 193.

³² See memorandum from Rusk to Bowles, 18 February 1961, *FRUS*, 1961–1963, *XXIII*, 313–14.

³³ See Bunnell, 'Kennedy Initiatives', 166 and *passim*; Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 375–7.

would invite Sukarno for informal talks at the White House in April.³⁴ The prospect of a Sukarno visit generated fresh debates about how the West Irian issue could be resolved, with significant voices in the CIA expressing strong doubts that backing the Indonesian position would reap any benefits for the West.³⁵ The State Department's eventual position was to maintain that the Dutch must eventually leave the territory, but rather than a direct transfer to Indonesian control, a UN trusteeship could be introduced, with Malaya acting as the trustee, while a direct UN trusteeship was a fall-back position.³⁶ This kind of compromise was considered profoundly inadequate by members of the NSC staff, where Walt W. Rostow, Bundy's deputy, Robert H. Johnson, who held the brief for the Far East as a whole, and Robert W. Komer who, though specializing in the Middle East, interested himself in the non-aligned world generally, emerged as the champions of a more positive approach that would pressure the Dutch to simply hand over control of West Irian to Indonesia. Rostow was told by Komer that:

If the prime reason for a policy shift is to keep Indonesia from sliding away, we must come up with a solution which is broadly satisfactory with the Indonesians. If we do not, we merely let ourselves in for a pack of trouble without gaining the advantage which led us to move in the first place. Of course, if we are proposing trusteeship not only as graceful out for the Netherlands but as cover operation for eventually giving WNG [West New Guinea] to the Indonesians, it might make sense. But if this is the case, why not tell the President? [...] I'm sure we all agree that Indonesia will eventually get WNG, that we cannot afford to buck Sukarno on this issue while the Soviets back him, and that the Dutch will have to give. But we always enter these painful transactions with a little move that stirs up a ruckus and leads us from crisis to crisis before the issue is resolved in the way we knew it would be in the first place, but with all parties mad at us.³⁷

Some of Kennedy's own views came across when he saw the Dutch Foreign Minister, Joseph Luns, prior to Sukarno's visit. As well as highlighting recent Dutch moves to prepare the inhabitants of West Irian for local self-government, Luns was eager for the President to deliver a warning to Sukarno over any resort to force, but Kennedy preferred to emphasize: 'When the United States shoots across Sukarno's bow, increased Soviet influence and efforts would be an inevitable result.' Moreover, the

³⁴ Jakarta to DOS, 23 February 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963, XXIII*, 314-16.

³⁵ See e.g. Frederick P. Bunnell, 'The Central Intelligence Agency-Deputy Directorate for Plans 1961 Secret Memorandum on Indonesia: a Study in the Politics of Policy Formulation in the Kennedy Administration', *Indonesia*, 1981.

³⁶ Memorandum from Rusk to Kennedy, 3 April 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963, XXIII*, 336-9.

³⁷ Komer memorandum for Rostow, 5 April 1961, Staff Memoranda, Robert Komer, 4/1/61-4/16/61, Meetings and Memoranda series, NSF, JFKL.

President was mystified as to why the Dutch attached such importance to retaining their position in West Irian, and with the United States so heavily engaged in both Laos and Vietnam, expressed his reluctance to take on any more commitments in South East Asia.³⁸ In subsequent talks with Rusk, and to the irritation of the NSC staff, Luns was told that he hoped no impression was received that the US attitude to the use of force had in any way changed, softening somewhat the earlier effect of the President's stonewalling on this question. Though sceptical it would gain the necessary support in the General Assembly, the Dutch were happy for the Americans to pursue ideas for an eventual UN trusteeship over West Irian, as long as the principle of self-determination was not lost.³⁹ In direct contrast to the prevailing State Department view, Johnson and Komer argued that (in the former's words):

our principal objective is to improve the outlook for a non-Communist Indonesia and only secondarily to satisfy Dutch emotional needs . . . our approach must be quite clearly directed toward an Indonesian takeover of WNG at a reasonably early date. While we need a formula that will save face for the Dutch by making a bow in the direction of self-determination, we should not in the process delude ourselves or confuse the Indonesians as to our real objective.⁴⁰

Sukarno's visit to Washington was an amicable affair, and seemed for the Indonesian President, regarding Kennedy as an impressive leader who was sympathetic to the aspirations of Asian nationalism, to signify a fresh start in his relations with the United States.⁴¹ Sukarno arrived at a difficult time for the President, only a few days after the failure of the Bay of Pigs expedition, and Kennedy himself found Sukarno personally distasteful (due, apparently, to the latter's brazen requests for US officials to procure him some female company while in the capital). When the key matter of West Irian was raised in the official talks on 24 April, Sukarno's appeals for clear American support for the Indonesian claim were unproductive, while Kennedy 'expressed the hope that the Indonesian Government would not consider the use of force' and that 'the problem would be made more complex and difficult a solution [sic] if there were military action in the area'.⁴² This was somewhat less than a 'warning' as desired by the Dutch, but was also hardly the swing to a pro-Indonesian policy that the NSC staff had been lobbying for. As a

³⁸ Memorandum of conversation, 10 April 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963, XXIII*, 345-51.

³⁹ See memoranda of conversations, 10 and 11 April 1961, and Johnson memorandum for Rostow, 17 April 1961, *ibid.*, 352-64.

⁴⁰ Johnson memorandum for Rostow, 18 April 1961, *ibid.*, 364-7.

⁴¹ Jones, *Indonesia*, 195-7.

⁴² Memorandum of conversation, 24 April 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963, XXIII*, 382-90.

positive gesture towards Indonesia's future economic stability, Kennedy offered to provide help with Indonesia's recently announced Eight Year Development Plan through the despatch of a team of economists led by Professor Don D. Humphrey, which would report on how the US could best lend assistance. The President was still keen, at this stage, to try to retain a balance between his need for a friendly and reliable Netherlands in Europe, and the central role played by Indonesia both in fulfilling US goals in South East Asia and in overall strategy towards the non-aligned world.

During the summer of 1961 the prospects for a peaceful resolution of the dispute remained uncertain. After Sukarno's trip to Moscow in June, deliveries of Soviet aircraft and military equipment began to gather pace, adding to Indonesian confidence. Moreover, the last remnants of the Outer Island rebels began to give themselves up to the Army in the spring, and in August 1961, Sukarno announced a general amnesty for those who agreed to surrender before October, allowing the military to concentrate on the possibility of a campaign against the Dutch.⁴³ Meanwhile, with the Netherlands Government having indicated that they would eventually need to disengage from the territory, the State Department had begun a series of secret bilateral talks with Dutch officials to discuss proposals for either a trusteeship for West Irian or some form of investigative UN committee which would make recommendations. In August, Jones was authorized to begin his own dialogue with the Indonesians on possible formulas for a solution, though Subandrio held that before the issue was taken to a UN forum, the Indonesians would need some prior assurances over the real Dutch attitude. As the sixteenth annual session of the UN General Assembly approached, there was considerable American pessimism that any trusteeship proposal would be acceptable in the light of the UN's ongoing Congo experience, while ideas for a UN committee of investigation had run into both British and (more significantly given its administration of Papua New Guinea) Australian objections, both fearing that its membership would be dominated by Afro-Asian states.

The Dutch came to the General Assembly in New York with the announcement that they were prepared to hand over West Irian to a UN administration with a view to preparing the territory for self-determination. Their draft resolution called for a UN commission of enquiry which could organize a plebiscite on the territory's future, while the UN took West Irian under its trusteeship, though some Dutch administrators would stay on as UN accredited officials. Appealing for American help to find a solution based on Jakarta's claims to sovereignty, the Indonesians made

⁴³ See Kahin and Kahin, *Subversion*, 214–15.

clear they found the Dutch resolution unacceptable. At this stage, Robert Johnson's efforts to secure Rusk's intervention to change the Dutch position proved fruitless, the latter fearing that the Americans would be blamed if a negotiation failed.⁴⁴ Hence, before he left for his important trip to Vietnam in mid-October 1961, Rostow presented a memorandum to Kennedy which maintained that Indonesian control of West Irian was the only possible permanent solution to the dispute and argued that Dutch tactics at the UN showed that 'they are playing a double game with us', as the United States would either have to side with the Dutch resolution, and so antagonize Indonesia, or oppose it, and appear to reject the principle of self-determination. Subandrio had taken the tabling of the Dutch resolution as a 'declaration of war'. Rostow felt that the Dutch had to be told plainly that their proposals were inadequate, could not be endorsed and should be withdrawn if they were not prepared to modify them. The President was encouraged to take the subject up with Rusk so that the necessary pressure could be put on the Dutch at the UN.⁴⁵

Although the NSC staff finally managed to elicit from Kennedy the view that the USA should 'lean gently' on the Dutch while avoiding direct involvement, there was palpable frustration that this message was not getting across to the State Department.⁴⁶ The US delegation to the UN was busy preparing its own alternative resolution to the Dutch proposal which tried to reach a compromise formula by leaving the final arrangements for the territory's status an open issue and toning down all references to self-determination. Yet all such efforts seemed futile exercises considering the increasingly belligerent language coming from the Indonesians and their rejection of both the Dutch- and US-drafted resolutions.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Rusk took the decision to push forward the US compromise resolution and oppose all others proposed, despite the strong likelihood that Indonesia would find it impossible to support and that they could muster the necessary General Assembly votes to block it. Johnson was exasperated by Rusk's unwillingness to consult the President on tactics at the UN, and now felt that 'the end result of all of the months of work has been to put us in a worse position vis-à-vis the Indonesians on this issue than we have ever been in the past'. The Americans would now be actively opposing the Indonesians at the UN, while the pressures for a military solution from within Indonesia were likely to increase.⁴⁸ At the end of

⁴⁴ Memorandum by Johnson for Rostow, 29 September 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963, XXIII*, 435-7.

⁴⁵ Memorandum from Rostow to Kennedy, 13 October 1961, *ibid.*, 440-2.

⁴⁶ See memorandum from Johnson to Bundy, 6 November 1961, *ibid.*, 447-52.

⁴⁷ Memorandum from Johnson to Rostow, 15 November 1961, *ibid.*, 455-7.

⁴⁸ Memorandum from Johnson to Rostow, 16 November 1961, *ibid.*, 458-60.

November, the US-conceived resolution failed to receive the necessary two-thirds majority from the General Assembly, and the Americans voted against an Indian resolution calling for direct bilateral talks, which also failed.

This was, as Rostow expressed it, 'a fiasco', with the US delegation having voted against the Indonesians twice, the second time reversing the previous American record of abstaining when Indonesian resolutions calling for direct talks on West Irian had been introduced in the 1950s. While they pressed on with belated measures to promote political development in the territory, the Dutch were taking every opportunity to highlight the fact that their position on the issue of self-determination had received American backing. In the view of the NSC staff, the State Department would now need to change its whole approach to the problem; the only paradoxical consolation of the recent UN debates was that the US resolution had failed. 'It is the feeling of all of us on your staff', Rostow informed Kennedy, 'that the Western world has got to consider this problem somewhat less in terms of the pure diplomacy of West Irian and more in terms of a common interest in frustrating communism in Indonesia.'⁴⁹ There was still time, Komer felt, before the Indonesians decided to use force: '... we have to get the President personally to weigh in on State. Now that the UN gambit has failed, time has come for him to press Rusk on why we shouldn't now lean on Aussies and Dutch.'⁵⁰ The President was in turn advised by McGeorge Bundy that

most of the specialists in the area believe that the Secretary's respect for the Australians and dislike of Sukarno has led him to take a position in the UN debate which, if continued, can only help the Communists. Sukarno, I know, is not your own favourite statesman, but the real point is that at the moment we seem to be working against the interest of the Indonesian moderates – our one reliance against eventual Communist take-over there.⁵¹

Reports from CIA sources at this time pointed to the awkward position faced by Nasution, and that he was a voice holding out for a negotiated solution to the problem in the face of the belligerence of other figures close to Sukarno.⁵²

The difficulties being encountered over formulating policy towards Indonesia were bound up, in many eyes (including the President's), with

⁴⁹ Memorandum from Rostow to Kennedy, 30 November 1961, *ibid.*, 463–5.

⁵⁰ Memorandum from Komer to Rostow, 30 November 1961, *ibid.*, 469–70.

⁵¹ Memorandum from Bundy to Kennedy, 1 December 1961, *ibid.*, 462–3.

⁵² CIA information report, TDCS-3/494, 341, 'General Nasution's attitude towards the West Irian problem', 28 November 1961, National Security File (NSF), countries file, West New Guinea, 12/1/61–12/5/61, JFKL.

the failure of the State Department adequately to respond to the demands it had faced throughout a crisis-laden year. Kennedy was respectful of the prerogatives of the Secretary of State, but press criticism of Rusk's alleged indecisiveness had gathered pace in the summer, while Administration insiders such as Arthur Schlesinger were ready to talk about his shortcomings.⁵³ The perception of shambolic organization and lack of leadership at the State Department made a sharp and painful contrast with McNamara's energetic and assertive management of the Defense Department, already being marked out as one of the early successes of the Administration. The President-elect had not known Rusk before selecting him in December 1960, and had in fact hoped to appoint J. William Fulbright, but this had been opposed by Robert Kennedy, who was concerned that the Arkansas Senator's identification with southern segregation would handicap the Administration's approach to the developing world. Instead, the strong recommendations of Acheson and Robert Lovett secured the job for Rusk.⁵⁴ Now Kennedy, despite all the reservations over Rusk's performance held by many, including his own brother, was reluctant to displace the Secretary of State, as this would reflect badly on his initial judgement in making the appointment.⁵⁵ Hence, when the anticipated State Department shake-up occurred at the end of November 1961 (the so-called 'Thanksgiving Day Massacre'), Rusk was spared. Instead, Chester Bowles, the Under-Secretary who had also been disparaged by the Kennedys for his verbosity, indecisiveness and after-the-event wisdom over the Bay of Pigs episode, was removed. Upgraded to become Rusk's deputy was the highly regarded figure of George Ball, while Rostow was brought over from the NSC staff to head a more grandly titled Policy Planning Council at the State Department.⁵⁶

Of overriding significance for policy towards Indonesia, however, was the arrival of Averell Harriman as the new Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs. The previous incumbent, Walter McConaughy, had been appointed by Rusk in April (having previously acted as Ambassador to South Korea), but had failed to invigorate the Far East Bureau. Harriman had gained credibility with the President and his advisers during the summer of 1961 by his skilful handling of the Geneva negotiations over

⁵³ Schlesinger memorandum for Bundy, 11 August 1961, box WH-3A, Schlesinger papers; see also Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 384-90, Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 35-6.

⁵⁴ See Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made: Acheson, Bohlen, Harriman, Kennan, Lovett, McCloy* (New York, 1986), 592-5; Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman (eds.), *Robert Kennedy In His Own Words* (London, 1988), 36-7.

⁵⁵ Robert F. Kennedy Oral History.

⁵⁶ Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 392-4; Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 50-1.

the conflict in Laos and his clear-sighted pursuit of the neutralization solution that Kennedy advocated.⁵⁷ It was Bowles who had first suggested Harriman for the Far East assignment, hoping the latter's sympathy for nationalist aspirations in the developing world made him a good candidate for the task. Schlesinger spoke to Harriman about the idea in early October, and though the latter felt more at home with European affairs, he indicated he would be prepared to serve the President wherever it was thought he might be helpful, though he would need to be assured of his 'operating authority', and that he should not have to report through U. Alexis Johnson, the Deputy Under Secretary for Political Affairs (and an official closely associated with the previous Administration's controversial policies in Laos, while serving as the US Ambassador to Thailand, January 1958–April 1961).⁵⁸ On 15 November, Harriman's seventieth birthday, Kennedy met the veteran diplomat and offered him the position, Schlesinger advising the President that 'Averell has strong views on the people who have been shaping our policy in Southeast Asia. He will not volunteer these views in his talk with you; but he will probably respond with alacrity to any questions you might wish to ask him about his judgment of the people involved.'⁵⁹ Later that day, Bundy saw Rusk to argue that the President felt the 'need to have someone on this job that is wholly responsive to [his] policy, and that [he] really did not get that sense from most of us'. When Bundy put forward Harriman's name for the Far East Bureau, the Secretary of State countered by saying that Harriman was still needed at the Geneva talks and that 'Alexis would loyally carry out any policy [the President] directed.' Bundy was far from convinced and advised Kennedy that 'Averell is your man, as Assistant Secretary', and pushed for a 'general game of musical chairs' at the State Department, but that Rusk 'won't do this till you tell him to'. Within a few hours, the President was seeing the Secretary of State and issuing the necessary instructions.⁶⁰

Harriman's long experience of government service and international diplomacy won him automatic respect, while he was possessed of a natural

⁵⁷ See Isaacson and Thomas, *The Wise Men*, 618–19.

⁵⁸ Schlesinger memorandum for Kennedy, 9 October 1961, President's Office Files, box 65, JFKL.

⁵⁹ Schlesinger memorandum for Kennedy, 15 November 1961, President's Office Files, box 30, JFKL.

⁶⁰ See Bundy memorandum for Kennedy, 15 November 1961, NSF, Departments and Agencies series, Department of State, 11/13/61–11/21/61, JFKL. See also Bundy's handwritten note of 15 November 1961: 'Sec/State. Would take Averell for this [Far East Bureau] and have discussed it with him – perhaps adding India and Pak to Far East Area. Averell for McConaughy would be *major* gain. The way to do this is to get Averell back here and in charge – RIGHT AWAY.' President's Office Files, box 88, JFKL. See also the lengthier memorandum in *FRUS, 1961–1963, I*, 612–14.

authority and power of command, and was intensely loyal to the office of President. What most impressed and surprised his younger colleagues, moreover, was his enthusiasm for unconventional ideas and willingness to learn. On his arrival, Harriman was determined to change the culture and prestige of the Far East Bureau, which during the McCarthy era had suffered the loss of some of its finest Asia specialists and was felt by many to be the most conservative section of the State Department. Taking over the Bureau, Harriman would comment that it was a 'wasteland . . . It's a disaster area filled with human wreckage . . . Perhaps a few can be saved. Some of them are so beaten down, they can't be saved. Some of those you would want to save are just finished. They try and write a report and nothing comes out. It's a terrible thing.'⁶¹ One consequence of Harriman's arrival was to be a greater tone of scepticism towards prevailing Vietnam policy, a trend which was to culminate in the desire to dissociate the USA from the Diem regime in the south, and ultimately, towards the end of 1963, to advocate its overthrow. Another area where a new approach was more immediately displayed was over policy towards Indonesia. A sign of the change in tenor was provided soon after his appointment by Harriman's reaction to the comments of a television presenter about 'that Communist, Sukarno', the Assistant Secretary snapping back in characteristic style, 'He is not a Communist, he's a nationalist!'⁶²

By late 1961, following the inconclusive UN debates, there was certainly a need to smooth ruffled Indonesian feathers through such greater identification with an Asian perspective. On 8 December, Sukarno had told Jones that he had been 'shattered' by the US stance at the UN, believing that the Americans had abandoned neutrality and were now actually supporting the Dutch in the dispute. Above the Ambassador's protests, the Indonesian President indicated that a forceful resolution to the problem seemed his only option, while his public speeches of the period were suffused with inflammatory rhetoric. At this critical juncture, Kennedy despatched a conciliatory message to Sukarno, emphasizing that the American attitude remained neutral, and that only small differences now seemed to exist between the Dutch and Indonesian positions. The President offered the services of the USA as a direct mediator, but went on to gently caution against any resort to force.⁶³ India's invasion of Goa on 17 December, along with the other remaining Portuguese enclaves on its territory, heightened the tense atmosphere

⁶¹ Harriman quoted in Halberstam, *Best and the Brightest*, 189, and see also, 188–99.

⁶² Quoted in Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 378; see also Jones, *Indonesia*, 203.

⁶³ See telegram from Bundy to Kennedy, 8 December 1961; telegrams from DOS to Jakarta, 9 December 1961, *FRUS, 1961–1963, XXIII*, 473–8.

by underlining the impression that the last vestiges of European colonialism in Asia were now on the back foot; two days later Sukarno announced a concentration of forces in eastern Indonesia, and small-scale infiltration of West Irian by amphibious raiding parties began soon after.

Both the Americans and the Indonesians had strong doubts that Dutch public opinion was prepared to face a full-scale conflict in the Pacific, especially if no assistance could be expected from other parties; indeed, Luns was often pictured as pursuing a personal crusade over West Irian, with the government in The Hague following rather uncomfortably behind. The NSC staff felt that the best way to encourage some flexibility in the Dutch position, and to shake them out of their complacency, was to let it be known they could expect no US support in the event of a major conflict erupting with the Indonesians. Harriman immediately made his influence felt on this issue when he informed Dutch officials that no assistance could be expected if the Indonesians attacked; the Dutch also agreed to drop Indonesian acceptance of the principle of self-determination as a precondition for starting negotiations.⁶⁴

From 19–23 December 1961, Kennedy and Macmillan met on Bermuda for talks which dealt primarily with the subjects of Berlin and nuclear testing, though West Irian also featured. It would seem that just prior to these discussions the President had told Rusk that Dutch requests for even token levels of support should be refused. During the Anglo-American talks, the Secretary of State outlined his own belief that the Indonesians were not serious about launching a large-scale attack in the short term, while the President began to define American policy more closely in his meetings with Macmillan. Asserting that it would be a mistake to become involved in supporting the Dutch in the defence of West Irian, Kennedy made clear that his Administration had made no commitment to helping the Dutch in the event of an attack, and had no intention of doing so. Military operations would simply strengthen the PKI internally, and the right policy should be to persuade the Dutch to accept arrangements which would allow for them to leave the area. The Australians would also need to be impressed with the need to avoid a military clash over West Irian, and it was agreed by both leaders that 'it would be preferable that the Western Powers should refrain from offering to support the Dutch in resisting any Indonesian attack on this territory'.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Memorandum of conversation, 22 December 1961, *ibid.*, 495–8.

⁶⁵ Notes of conversation between Rusk and Home, 21 December 1961; and record of meeting at Government House, Bermuda, between Kennedy and Macmillan, 22 December 1961, PREM 11/3782.

By mid-January 1962, the naval tensions between the Netherlands and Indonesia had intensified, with clashes in the waters around West Irian, leading Komer to predict that without an even bigger shift in policy, 'we may be heading for a really major defeat in SEA [South East Asia] – one which would dwarf the loss of Laos'.⁶⁶ Shortly after, the President mirrored such concerns over the crisis, when he informed a full gathering of the NSC that:

The area is a most unsuitable one for a war in which the United States would be involved. We would not wish to humiliate the Dutch, but on the other hand it would be foolish to have a contest when the Dutch really do want to get out if a dignified method can be found. We should recognize that this territory was likely eventually to go to Indonesia, even though we ourselves might deeply dislike Sukarno as an individual. The real stake here is not West Irian but the fate of Indonesia, the most rich and populous country in the area and one which was the target of energetically pursued Soviet ambitions.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, from Jakarta Sukarno was signalling that he was prepared to enter into direct talks with the Dutch, but only if there was advance understanding that the purpose of such negotiations was to provide for a transfer to Indonesian administration of West Irian.⁶⁸ Sukarno and Subandrio also indicated, however, that they would be prepared to make some public declaration on self-determination prior to talks as a face-saving device for the Dutch. Despite the narrowing of the differences between the two sides, Indonesian patience with the laboriousness of the process of organizing direct talks was wearing thin.

One way to push forward the momentum behind the negotiating process was suggested by the fact that the Attorney General was due to pass through Jakarta as part of a wider trip to Asian capitals in mid-February. Robert Kennedy was well received, winning goodwill for his frank expression of earnest American desires to see a peaceful resolution of the dispute, and his open pronouncements of friendship towards the Indonesian people. In his talks with Sukarno, the Attorney General pressed the Indonesians to drop their preconditions for negotiations, while also coming close to hinting that the USA would use its influence behind the scenes with the Dutch to assure that any negotiation resulted in an outcome acceptable to the Indonesians.⁶⁹ When the Attorney General turned to

⁶⁶ Komer memorandum for Kaysen, 15 January 1962, NSF, Meetings and Memoranda, Komer memos, 1/62, JFKL.

⁶⁷ Kennedy remarks to 496th mtg of the NSC, 18 January 1962, *FRUS, 1961–1963, VIII*, 241.

⁶⁸ Jakarta to DOS, 27 December 1961, *FRUS, 1961–1963, XXIII*, 500–1.

⁶⁹ Jakarta to DOS, 14 February 1962, *ibid.*, 523–5. Robert Kennedy certainly did not emerge from this and his later Indonesian visit with any great liking for Sukarno; in April