There was a new sense of uncertainty within South-East Asia in the 1970s in relation to security planning as the level of United States and British involvement declined. Nixon had introduced his Guam Doctrine stating that in the future, unless there is a threat from a nuclear power, the United States would expect Asian nations to start to take responsibility for their own defence. South-East Asian nations took this seriously, especially in light of decreasing American involvement in the Vietnam War and Britain’s decision to withdraw its defence facilities in Malaysia and Singapore. While the British withdrawal had a significant effect on Commonwealth nations, Nixon’s announcement had a significant impact on the South-East Asian nations as it signalled a change in the regional strategies of the great powers – the United States, the Soviet Union and China. ASEAN foreign ministers responded to the change in the regional security environment by calling for a ‘Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality’ (ZOPFAN). However, the principal concern of the declaration was with relations of the external powers to the South-East Asian region. Despite being a signatory to this declaration, Singapore placed more value on being part of the FPDA with Malaysia, Britain, Australia and New Zealand to cover its own defence needs. Thailand and the Philippines were unwilling to eject United States bases from their shores while Indonesia was sceptical about foreign powers guaranteeing the neutrality of South-East Asia. So, despite the creation of formal regional cooperation, external relations continued to shape the evolving security environment in South-East Asia.

**Great power strategy in South-East Asia**

With these signs of Western retrenchment apparent, Moscow was become increasingly interested in South-East Asia, seeking to make use
of both the reduced American and British military presence, and concern about China among South-East Asian nations. The Sino-Soviet rivalry was the main reason for this increased interest in the region. Despite the strong anti-communist stance among many South-East Asian countries, Chinese and not Soviet activity was causing the greatest concern for these nations. Thus, it was the reduction of the Western defence position along with the anxiety about how the Chinese would react to the departure of Western forces, and the Soviet Union seeking to vie for influence against China, that led these nations to fear their region would remain an area for great-power competition.¹

Within this new strategic environment, Washington sought a new foreign policy strategy by expressing an interest in seeking accommodation with the Chinese Government. The Chinese accepted American overtures and Kissinger made a secret visit to Beijing in July 1971, which then paved the way for Nixon’s official visit in February 1972: the first visit to China by an American president. During this visit, both sides signed the Shanghai Communique, agreeing to the formalisation of bilateral diplomatic relations. Yet concern about a Sino-American détente, and a need for grain imports from America also prompted the Kremlin to invite Nixon to Moscow in May 1972, another first by an American president. Observers noted that the American approaches to Moscow and Beijing ‘have had unsettling effects on America’s relations with its allies’.²

China was developing ties with foreign countries, especially through trade. The Chinese economy faced serious problems as the Cultural Revolution wound down and Beijing turned to the West and Japan for foreign imports.³ For the Western powers, a more significant threat came from the Soviet Union and its expanding influence in Indochina. However, China was considered a big threat by many South-East Asian nations, especially Indonesia. Despite the United States commitment to détente in the region, by 1975 Suharto still considered China a problem. He believed that Beijing and Moscow were competing to expand their own influence in South-East Asia and that communist elements continued to threaten Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines.⁴

Nixon’s pursuit of détente with China and the Soviet Union provided an environment conducive for negotiations on Vietnam. However, while Washington was improving United States relations with Beijing and Moscow, Hanoi intensified its military actions against South Vietnam in 1972. Nixon’s overtures to China and the Soviet Union worried North Vietnam and when the United States retaliated through air strikes and the mining of Haiphong Harbour, Moscow helped derail the