For some time now, U.S. satellites have documented China’s steady militarization of the South China Sea. In various combinations, China’s artificial islands are equipped with military grade airstrips, hangars, harbors, anti-aircraft guns, lighthouses and radar stations. Some also house structures ostensibly designed for both surface-to-air and cruise missiles. Of course, the leaders of most states situated around the South China Sea are wary of China’s regional ambitions. A number have also disputed the ownership of several islands with China (and each other) for years, all pursuing access to fishing grounds and potential oil and gas reserves. Chinese offensive capabilities in the South China Sea have only upped the stakes; Vietnam and Taiwan have responded with island-building of their own, though at a tiny fraction of the expansive Chinese campaign.

As all this unfolds, President Donald Trump hurtles toward the milestone of his first one-hundred days in office, in his wake a trail of policy positions that have unsettled U.S. allies in Asia. Trump had seemed ready to overturn forty-years of America’s One-China policy in a call with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen, but backpedaled at the request of Chinese President Xi Jinping. The new U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had in January 2017 advocated getting tough on China’s activities in the South China Sea, but in a subsequent press conference with Xi seemed so deferential to the Chinese leader, as if conceding (which the Obama administration did not) that China was America’s equal in the
region. And, this is not to mention how quickly Trump scuttled the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, which U.S.-friendly governments in East and Southeast Asia have striven to promote, and which observers knew from the outset had been one of the Obama administration’s methods of containing Chinese influence. With all this evidence, it is tempting to conclude that the Trump administration, faced with China’s growing power, has all but a waning commitment to America’s Asian allies.

It may be too soon to tell how the Trump administration will actually engage the countries of the Asia Pacific and respond to the challenge of China’s rise. But, it is worth noting the striking, if imperfect, parallels between current U.S.-Asian relations and those of the Cold War era. In the late 1960s, ASEAN leaders and their pro-U.S. counterparts in South Vietnam also harbored grave doubts about America’s security guarantees to its friends. The U.S. had been unable to win the Vietnam War and wanted out, possibly even from the region altogether. In July 1969, President Richard Nixon’s remarks (which journalists later dubbed Nixon Doctrine), delivered in Guam, further unnerved his Asian allies. On the one hand, Nixon affirmed that the U.S. “should continue to play a significant role” in Asia, for like many Asian leaders he thought that China’s support for communists in Indochina and elsewhere evinced a “belligerent” foreign policy. But he also sought to drastically reduce U.S. commitment to Asia, and stated that except for formal treaties, the U.S. must “avoid that kind of policy” that would result in wars similar to that in Vietnam.

When pressed by American reporters in Guam to be more precise about the nature of U.S. involvement in Asia, Nixon equivocated. He implied that America was retreating from Asia, for the U.S. “has a right to expect” that Asian nations must be responsible for
their own security (again except in the case of formal treaties). But then he pledged that U.S. policy “rules out withdrawal” from the Pacific, and that America would still play the role that Asian nations “desire us to play.”

Noncommunist Asian leaders, already skeptical of U.S. commitment to them, found Nixon’s answers frustrating. He had seemed at times too nonchalant about China’s influence in Southeast Asia, asserting that Beijing had recently become less and less “effective in exporting revolution”. To ASEAN leaders who had cast their lot with the United States against Hanoi and Beijing, this rang false. Throughout the 1960s, communist groups in Southeast Asia continued to be galvanized by China’s call for world revolution. ASEAN leaders, while sporadically expressing reservations, nonetheless saw the U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia as a bulwark against the Vietnamese revolution and Chinese expansionism.

Then Nixon upended this arrangement suddenly in 1971. He announced that he would visit China, begin normalizing relations with Beijing, and thereby reverse two decades of America’s non-recognition of the People’s Republic of China. His decision profoundly disappointed the ASEAN leaders given the years they had spent supporting America’s containment of the PRC. Thereafter, ASEAN governments reluctantly adopted a conciliatory stance toward Beijing.

It is anyone’s guess whether the Trump administration’s approach to Asia has caused comparable dismay to pro-TPP Asian leaders and traditional U.S. allies in the broader region. And while we should not overstate the similarities between the past and present,
there is no doubt that ASEAN leaders were in 1971, as they are today, deeply troubled about the future of U.S.-Asian relations.

But ASEAN leaders of the Cold War era were certainly not hapless spectators to big power politics. While the U.S. fought in Vietnam, all the ASEAN governments raced to buttress their political stability and economies by forging closer relations with western countries, as well as U.S.-friendly nations in the wider region such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Moreover, almost all the ASEAN leaders (bar the Indonesians) effectively lobbied China to endorse a Malaysian proposal for the superpowers to guarantee the neutrality of Southeast Asia. In fact, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai would tell U.S. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger that the ASEAN leaders had preempted Nixon’s visit to China and promoted their ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality) Plan, to which Zhou had been receptive. Furthermore, records of the historic talks between Nixon and Zhou in February 1972 reveal that Zhou reworked the salient principles of ZOPFAN into the Sino-U.S. Joint Declaration that, in turn, kicked off the process of normalizing relations between Washington and Beijing.

For those seeking lessons from this episode in Cold War history, there is one takeaway that trumps all: smaller nations wielded an underappreciated influence over the big powers and their own fates.

Of course, much has changed in the Sino-U.S.-ASEAN relationship since the 1970s. Today, the countries of Southeast Asia are comparatively more stable politically, economically and socially than during the Cold War. Chinese trade, investment and contacts with Southeast Asia have increased exponentially, as have American investment
and business in the region. While we cannot say for sure how the Trump administration’s policies and Chinese island-building will affect U.S.-Asian relations, we should be reasonably confident that the Southeast Asians will continue to play a substantial role in shaping their future.

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