



Anthony Eden, *Anglo-American Relations and the 1954 Indochina Crisis*

by Kevin Ruane and Matthew Jones.

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In this new study of a key period in the early Cold War, historians Kevin Ruane¹ (Canterbury Christ Church Univ.) and Matthew Jones² (London School of Economics) contend that “For Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, the prospect of ongoing war in Indochina was the stuff of nightmares” (1). Eden feared an Eisenhower-led international war in French Indochina that, he believed, would precipitate China’s intervention and maybe a thermonuclear third world war. The authors offer a brilliant, sophisticated account of Eden’s diplomacy during the Indochina Crisis, which most British and American scholars consider a crucial turning point in the Cold War. Although their research and analysis here are not completely original, they stand out for their depth, precision, and clarity.

The book’s thesis is that Anthony Eden prevented an international war and possibly a third world war by mediating the troublesome disputes over Indochina between the United States, France, China, and the Soviet Union. Eden managed to contain American and Chinese ambitions in the Far East and bring peace to Indochina. Ruane and Jones begin by sketching the Chinese and Vietminh dimensions of the French Indochina War. The nature of the conflict changed dramatically with the election of Dwight D. Eisenhower, who selected John Foster Dulles as his Secretary of State. The authors write that, “Convinced of the US Secretary’s near-omnipotence as the shaper and mover of foreign policy, the British came to look on Eisenhower as little more than (in Churchill’s words) ‘a ventriloquist’s doll’” (41). Churchill could not have been more wrong. Dulles proposed nothing without Eisenhower’s approval.

Nevertheless, Churchill and Eden did understand the president’s willingness to use nuclear weapons. When they met with him and Dulles in Bermuda in December 1953, a major item on the agenda was the possibility that North Korea would break the recent armistice. Eisenhower explained to Churchill that the United States intended to use nuclear weapons if the armistice was breached. Churchill readily agreed and commented that he could tell the Parliament that he had been consulted in advance and had approved of the use of nuclear weapons. Hence “Eisenhower’s annoyance when, at Eden’s prompting, Churchill withdrew his support for US policy on Korea” (74). The president believed nuclear weapons should be treated like conventional weapons. Eden vigorously disagreed, and the advent of a Soviet hydrogen bomb brought Churchill around to his Foreign Secretary’s position.

The Berlin Conference of 1954 proved to be a dismal failure, with the notable exception of its arranging for a later conference in Geneva to deal with the difficult issues of East Asia. Eden, as the authors clarify, successfully pushed for a Five-Power Conference, to include the four powers at

1. His earlier work includes *Churchill and the Bomb in War and Cold War* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2018).

2. He is the author of *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent*, vol. 1: *From the V Bomber Era to the Arrival of Polaris, 1945-64* and vol. 2: *The Labour Government and the Polaris Programme, 1964-70* (NY: Routledge, 2017).

the Berlin Conference plus China. Having bridged the differences between the USSR and the allies on the controversial issue of Chinese participation, Eden appeared to the world as both a masterful statesman and a superb diplomat. He saw the Five-Power Conference as an invaluable opportunity to secure peace in Indochina.

Then, Dien Bien Phu changed everything. The Eisenhower administration began contemplating military action in Indochina, and Dulles gave his famous “United Action” speech at the Overseas Press Club in New York City (29 Mar. 1954).

Having cleared the text with the President, Dulles told his audience that “the imposition on South-East Asia of the political system of Communist Russia and its Chinese Communist ally by whatever means would be a grave threat to the whole free community.” The United States “feels that the possibility should not be passively accepted but should be met by united action...” [Thus] at the very moment the Eisenhower administration was seeking UK backing for an approach on Indochina that risked war with the PRC and potentially global war with the USSR, the British government, parliament and public were trying—and mostly failing—to come to terms with the terrifying implications of the hydrogen bomb. (96–97)

Churchill and Eden preferred a negotiated peace agreement. The most telling sign of the wide divergence between the two governments was that the Americans not only downplayed the Geneva Conference, but actually worked hard to sabotage it.

This fascinating and astonishing diplomatic struggle between Eden and Dulles in April 1954 continued to be truly Shakespearean in scope. Chapter 9, entitled “‘He lied to me,’ April 1954,” concerns Eden’s plotting with British Commonwealth leaders to delay the creation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) till after the Geneva Conference, while Dulles wanted to accelerate the process. The two men despised and distrusted each other. Eden told Dulles to his face (3 May 1954) “The trouble with you, Foster, is that you want World War Three” (163). Ruane and Jones demonstrate that the United States had planned for a military campaign in French Indochina, which most American historians still mistakenly dismiss as mere contingency measures. But they make a very compelling case concerning the perilous course of US military planning at the time.

In early June 1954, Eisenhower and Dulles reconsidered their plans right before an upcoming Anglo-American meeting in Washington later that month. The Geneva Conference had bogged down over a possible US military intervention in Indochina. But in Washington, Churchill made a significant diplomatic move unmentioned in the authors’ narrative. The Prime Minister, ignoring Eden, the Foreign Office, and international law, agreed to quash a UN investigation into a CIA-led overthrow of President Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala. This led to a concomitant American flexibility on Indochina. Eisenhower and Dulles finally agreed to a political partition of Vietnam. This major breakthrough eventually led to a peace agreement in Geneva.

Churchill’s gambit in Washington allowed Eden to broker a ceasefire in Indochina and a political partition of Vietnam that satisfied all the major parties in Geneva, except for the Americans. “On behalf of the United States, [Walter Bedell] Smith merely took note of the agreements and promised to ‘refrain from the threat or the use of force to disturb them’” (217). Anthony Eden deserved the world’s praise for ensuring peace in Indochina—with substantial help from Churchill behind the scenes.

The one flaw in the authors’ marvelous chronicle is its neglect of Churchill’s critical role in Eden’s success at Geneva. He rejected Eisenhower’s United Action policy and, aware of the Americans’ intense hostility toward Eden, proposed the Washington Conference that Eden himself opposed. When things became tough in Geneva, Churchill gave Eden excellent advice and total

support in getting a peace agreement—over the violent objections of the Americans. Eden could not otherwise have emerged as the great hero of the Geneva Conference.

Kevin Ruane and Matthew Jones have persuasively rehabilitated the tarnished reputation of Anthony Eden over his disastrous failure in the Suez Crisis in 1956. They aptly quote *Henry VIII*: “Men’s evil manners live in brass, their virtues we write in water” (255). Anthony Eden’s many virtues included a profound knowledge of international affairs and an extraordinary talent for diplomacy. These qualities were on full display in Geneva. The authors also reveal the weaknesses of SEATO and how the Americans fatally undermined the Geneva Agreements. In their conclusion, they discount any linkage between Indochina and the Suez Crisis. But Eisenhower’s vindictiveness against Eden during the crisis was all about political payback for Eden’s tremendous achievement at Geneva in 1954.