

This week in history: November 25-December 1

24 November 2024

25 years ago: ASEAN meets in Manila, Philippines over the contested Spratly and Paracels islands

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) met November 29-30 in Manila, Philippines to discuss the strategically important Spratly and Paracels islands located in the South China Sea. Members at the joint summit included China, the Philippines, Japan and South Korea. A proposal written by the Philippines outlined a “code of conduct” for member nations over the islands, calling for “a halt to any new occupation of reefs, shoals and islets in the disputed area to ensure peace and stability in the region.”

From the beginning, the agreement was stillborn. China refused to sign any document that included the Paracels, which were claimed not only by China, but by many other countries, including Taiwan and Vietnam. The Chinese government suspected any international body overseeing the territorial dispute would serve Washington’s interests as opposed to its own.

Once the agreement officially failed, the underlying national interests of ASEAN members exploded into the open. Riolo Golez, in the Philippine House of Representatives, accused China of plotting to conquer the Philippines, stating “the China blob is already close to Philippines shores with China’s recent territorial claims to Scarborough Shoal,” an island just north of the main Spratly islets and about 120 miles west of the Philippine island of Luzon.

The inflammatory tone from Manila was being fueled by the United States. During the South East Asian Security Conference in July, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made clear the intentions of the American government, saying “we cannot simply sit on the sidelines and watch.” Republican Congressman Dana Rohrabacher was more frank in his accusatory remarks, saying, “China is claiming the entire area in the South China Sea. This is a blueprint for war on the part of Beijing.”

Washington attempted to sow fears of a full-scale Chinese military buildup. US imperialism sought to fortify its strategic military alliance with the Philippines to control vital sea lanes and project hegemony across the South China Sea. To strengthen its own claims to these potential resource-rich islands, Orlando Mercado, the Philippine defense secretary said, “Our country is weak, is extremely vulnerable to external threats and needs this alliance (with the United States) in order to protect our national interests.”

Although most of the Spratlys consist of uninhabited islands, reefs and sea mountains, scattered across 800,000 square kilometers in the South China Sea, rich fishing spots, the potential of lucrative oil reserves and control over sea lanes make this location a significant flashpoint in world politics. Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines claim portions of the islands, based on the proximity to

their shores, while China and Taiwan claim complete ownership over the archipelago. Every coastal country, except Brunei, has stationed soldiers and small military bases. China occupied seven out of the 10 reefs and Taiwan controlled one of the largest islands, Taiping (Itu Abu).

50 years ago: British Parliament outlaws IRA, grants police emergency powers

On November 29, 1974, the Parliament of the United Kingdom passed the Prevention of Terrorism Acts. The laws made membership or support for the Irish Republican Army (IRA) illegal and gave sweeping powers to the police to arrest anyone suspected of association with the IRA without a warrant.

Other powers granted under the Acts included increasing surveillance of anyone traveling between Ireland and Britain. Police gained the power to arrest, detain and search anyone traveling across the border on the suspicion of terrorist activity.

Since 1969, the British Army had occupied Northern Ireland to repress the growing movement for civil rights for the Catholic minority and for Irish reunification. To resist the occupation many thousands joined or supported the IRA in a struggle against dictatorial military rule.

In August of 1971, the British military imposed a policy of mass internment in Northern Ireland. Anyone suspected of association with the IRA was arrested, held in large camps, and often tortured. Thousands of northern Irish youths were rounded up and thrown into detention centers under the policy.

The British occupation brought with it killings of Irish civilians by British soldiers, including the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre where 14 unarmed protesters were shot and killed and many more wounded. In 1973 the Northern Ireland parliament, known as Stormont, was abolished and direct British rule was imposed.

Under conditions of military occupation and the abolition of basic political rights, the IRA’s struggle for Irish unification took on the form of a guerrilla war that included terrorist bombings. By November 1974, these included bombing attacks in English cities like London and Birmingham. These attacks included the November 21 Birmingham pub bombings that killed 21 people and injured 182.

The bombings provided the pretext for the British government to launch its major repression of the IRA and political support for Irish nationalism in general. It was in the immediate aftermath of the bombings that the Terrorism Acts were introduced in Parliament.

The Acts led to six Irish workers living in Birmingham to be falsely

convicted of conducting the bombing and sentenced to life in prison. The men, known as the Birmingham Six, had been forced by British police to sign confessions under torture. It would not be until 1991 that their convictions were overturned and they were released from prison.

A statement by the Trotskyist movement in Britain at the time, the Workers Revolutionary Party, explained that the terrorist methods of the IRA would only result in the suppression of the rights of workers by British imperialism both in Ireland and Britain. The statement read, "If the first victims of these provocations are innocent workers in Birmingham, the next victims could indeed be the right of workers to organize strikes and demonstrate to defend their standard of living from capitalist attack."

75 years ago: Cominform calls for overthrow of the Tito regime in Yugoslavia

On November 29, 1949, the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform) issued a resolution calling for the overthrow of the regime in Yugoslavia headed by Tito.

The Cominform, founded in 1947 by Stalin and consisting of representatives from a number of European parties loyal to his regime, declared in the resolution that the struggle against the Tito regime "is the international duty of all Communist and Workers' Parties."

The resolution, titled, "The Communist Party of Yugoslavia in the power of murderers and spies," was an expression of Stalin's struggle to subordinate Yugoslavia, which had diverged from the policies of the Kremlin bureaucracy on a number of issues under Tito's rule, including the support given by the latter for anti-fascist partisans in Greece.

After years of attempting to subordinate Yugoslavia via political pressure, this new resolution was part of a shift by the Stalinist regime in its attitude towards the Tito regime. A Cominform resolution published on June 28, 1948, prescribed the purge of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CYP) leadership.

The November 1949 resolution by contrast demanded the complete overthrow of the regime as necessary to bring Yugoslavia to heel. It contained a denunciation of the CYP as comprised of "assassins and hireling spies," while Yugoslavia as a whole was described as an "anti-communist police state of a fascist type."

As described by the *Militant*, the US-based Trotskyist newspaper of the time, the resolution amounted to "a formal declaration of war upon Yugoslavia. These are not just empty words but orders issued by the Kremlin. Actions must of necessity follow orders."

Despite the intensity of the conflict, Tito remained a Stalinist in his political program and record. He defended the anti-Marxist program of socialism in one country, first elaborated by the Soviet bureaucracy as an expression of its nationalist orientation and defense of its own privileges. Tito continued to uphold the persecution of Trotskyists, who opposed the Soviet bureaucracy from the standpoint of a socialist and internationalist defense of the perspective of world socialist revolution.

100 years ago: British land troops in Egypt

On November 25, 1924, Lord Edmund Allenby, the British Special High Commissioner of Egypt, sent warships to Alexandria and landed troops in Egypt after Sir Lee Stack, the British Governor-General of the Sudan, was assassinated on November 19 by a group of nationalist students while being driven through Cairo. Egypt and Sudan at the time were a single polity under the control of British imperialism.

Allenby issued a set of draconian demands to the Egyptian government, including the payment of a humiliating indemnity of £500,000. The previous day British forces had sized the Customs House in Alexandria and succeeded in forcing the government to pay the sum. But the head of state, Zargul Pasha, was reluctant to accede to other British demands, and refused to take responsibility for the assassination. With the presence of warships and the threat of a further invasion by British troops, he submitted his resignation to King Fuad I and was replaced by Zeiwar Pasha.

The Egyptian parliament voted to appeal to the League of Nations. In the words of the *New York Times*, however, Britain had "declared a sort of Monroe Doctrine concerning Egypt and the Sudan and she would in all probability resent any outside interference with what she considers her rights there." The next day the League of Nations rejected the appeal from the Egyptian parliament.

Press reports at the time indicate a fear in Egyptian government circles that British conduct in the crisis would spark a national uprising. Allenby was a veteran imperialist military and political leader, particularly in the war against the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East and the British seizure of Palestine, and he had been instrumental in suppressing the Egyptian Revolution of 1919-20.

The British arrested four members of Zargul Pasha's cabinet on suspicion of conspiracy on November 27 and British troops surrounded an Egyptian unit in Sudan, which said that it would only move on orders from King Fuad. Two hundred troops mutinied in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan and killed one British and two Syrian physicians. The next day, the British suppressed the mutiny, and with the help of the Egyptian government, were able to restore its rule throughout the country.

In 1925 the assassins of Stack were hanged.



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