Marshall Green: America's Mr Asia

The career of a distinguished US diplomat during the Cold War has lessons for America's place in the region today

By James Curran

Not long after his arrival in Jakarta in 1965 as the freshly minted American Ambassador to Indonesia, Marshall Green was the guest of honour at a diplomatic reception hosted by President Sukarno. In the preceding years, the Indonesian leader had ramped up his nationalist rhetoric, diverting attention from a struggling economy in an effort to try to hold a far-flung and fractious political community together. Most alarmingly for Western observers was the growing power of the Indonesian Communist Party, then the third largest outside Moscow and Peking. Sukarno had succeeded in his demands to have the former Dutch territory of West New Guinea returned to Indonesia and had then embarked on a hostile policy of confrontation towards the new Malaysian Federation, believing it to be a neo-imperialist plot to encircle Indonesia. He had also called for a Peking–Jakarta axis, a move that had Washington, and Canberra, even more alarmed.

Green's remarks for the occasion had been carefully

prepared in Washington and necessarily tried to keep a somewhat restrained focus on the positives in the relationship. After the speech, Sukarno stepped forward and “delivered a terrific blast against American foreign policy”. Although tempted to leave the room, Green decided to stay, and was then introduced to the leading guests. One, a senior Indonesian Foreign Office official, Madame Supeni, was reputedly one of the president’s many mistresses. Green saw his chance to return fire at Sukarno, a nearby microphone carrying his riposte to the rest of the room. “Madame Supeni”, he gushed, “It’s a great pleasure to meet you. You know with that beautiful raven hair and flashing eyes and green sari I really couldn’t keep my mind on what the president was saying in his recent remarks. Could you tell me what he said?” After a deadly silence, Sukarno slapped his thigh and laughed uproariously, causing the entire diplomatic congregation to emit a prolonged sigh of relief.

One of America’s most gifted Asia experts and policymakers in the post-war period, Marshall Green prided himself on his quick wit and gift for comic repartee. His diplomatic memoirs even bore the subtitle “Recollections and humor” and featured countless episodes where his jokes, as a State Department colleague once recalled, were able to “relieve awkward tension, induce a more friendly mood between opposing negotiators, or cut through windy rhetoric”.

There can be no question that Green found a kind of boyish joy in reaching for the nearest pun. But humour might also have been a way of releasing the pressure. After all, his was a diplomatic career spent almost entirely at the coalface of America’s Asia policy from the beginning of the Second World War to the late 1970s. This was a period of extraordinary transformation in the region, in which the assertion of newfound nationalism jostled with chronic poverty and rapid economic development. Green was uniquely placed to observe the way in which these two forces, national self-assertion and modernisation, were shaping a new dynamic in East Asia. As the

author of the background brief which informed the Nixon doctrine emphasising limits to American power, and a key player in the remaking of US China policy, his career offers scholars a unique insight into how Washington negotiated the transition from the rigid, ideological bipolarity of the Cold War to the new, more fluid world that emerged in the early 1970s. Along the way, he himself underwent something of a transformation, from staunch advocate of a Pax Americana to open skeptic about the reach and range of Washington's power.

Being present at so many regional flashpoints meant that Green acquired something of a reputation as an Asian "trouble shooter". During the Taiwan Strait conflict in 1958, he served as crisis manager for secretary of state John Foster Dulles; as deputy head of mission in Korea in 1960–61 he observed the students uprising and the downfall of South Korean president Syngman Rhee, followed by a military *coup d'état* which overthrew a democratically elected government and installed President Park Chung-hee. And as consul general in Hong Kong — when that mission was the administration's "eyes and ears" on China — Green witnessed the tragic aftermath of the Great Leap Forward when thousands of Chinese refugees swarmed into Hong Kong.

In the early 1960s, he was recalled to Washington to lead a review of American China policy, where he recommended the easing of trade and travel restrictions. In Indonesia, his first posting as ambassador, Green watched as Sukarno and his pro-communist followers were replaced by Suharto, who made it clear that foreign investment would be welcomed and a more cooperative stance with regional partners adopted. Green then served as assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific affairs from 1969 to 1973, a period which saw the return of Okinawa to Japan, the bombing of North Vietnam, the Paris Peace Accords and Richard Nixon's trip to Peking. And he was ambassador in Australia when the relationship, as one American

official put it at the time, was “seriously out of whack”.

There was nothing in Green’s background or education that had prepared him for his long service in East Asia. Throughout his education he had no exposure to Asian languages or cultures. A self professed “little New Englander”, he often spent his summer holidays as a child travelling with his parents in Europe.

Educated at the prestigious Groton school and then Yale, his first career break came in October 1939 when the US ambassador to Japan, Joseph Grew, needed a private secretary. Green got the job, and a lifelong fascination with the country began. As he watched the storm clouds gather in North-East Asia, Green confessed to be “spoiling” to go to war with Japan. He travelled through Japanese occupied Korea, Manchuria, and northern China, seeing first hand the “ruthlessness of Japanese military rule”. The experience also forced him to think about the prevailing mood in his own country. Writing to his mother around this time, Green deplored the isolationist strain in the US debate. Americans had become “over humoured by the good fortune to which we have fallen heir. Where the youth of other lands are aggressive, we are retracting, and our doom, like that of the Greek and Roman civilisations, is sealed when we produce, in our declining years, men not willing to fight for what they have.” Green left Japan in May 1941 and joined the war effort, serving for the duration in the US Navy as an intelligence officer and, after learning Japanese, as an interpreter.

Entering the foreign service proper after World War II, Green’s first posting was as third secretary to Wellington, New Zealand, where despite an appreciation for America’s assistance in the Pacific War, he noted the strong pull of local sentiment back towards the “mother country”, especially in the form of bulk exports of primary products to a “hard-pressed England”.

But it was Japan that had profoundly influenced Green: the country was to become a self-declared "thread" throughout his career. In 1948, secretary of state George Marshall sent George Kennan, then head of policy planning in the state department, on a special mission to Japan, along with Green as his sole travelling companion and adviser. The visit resulted in the acceleration of the US government's shift in emphasis from occupation to economic recovery. The idea, Green said, was to "normalise things as far and as fast as one could to stave off growing, nationalist resentment against the occupation". Green described listening to Kennan's briefings as like seeing a "human eye ... piercing into the depths of eternity". Kennan had also taken issue with the policy of routinely "purging" those sections of the Japanese business or political elite who had been in any way responsible for the war effort, arguing that each case should be dealt with individually.

Out of that experience came a central lesson that was to guide much of Green's own approach to the rise of Asian nationalism: there was a need for the US to help its regional allies stand on their own two feet and take care of themselves. Later, he was intimately involved in preparing the recommendations for a mutual security treaty with Japan and in the negotiations relating to the ongoing presence of American bases there. Here too Green saw how the prickliness of domestic politics could wreak their own havoc on close alliance relationships. A "vociferous" left in Japan had "whipped the people up on the military base issue". In the late 1950s he accompanied Frank Nash, assistant secretary of defence, on the far eastern leg of a presidential mission to examine the issue of relations between US military bases and their host communities.

Despite these sensitivities to local issues, Green nevertheless was a creature of his culture, and prone to keeping faith with the prevailing Cold War orthodoxies. Had Indonesia gone communist, he believed, "all South-East Asia might have come under Communist domination."

With American forces in Vietnam, he argued that had Suharto not prevailed and the communists taken Indonesia, US troops "would have been caught in a kind of huge nutcracker": squeezed between communist insurgencies in north and South-East Asia. In Green's view, however, Indonesia became something of a model, showing that Asian solutions could solve Asian problems. Or, as he put it to Nixon some years later, Indonesia showed how "traditionalism and emotional nationalism" could give way to "modernisation and productive relationships with other countries." Green emerged from that posting convinced that a much lighter American footprint in Asia was required, along with an acceptance that the US could not control every situation.

As ambassador in Jakarta, Green had made a favourable impression on Nixon, and the two had discussed regional affairs at length during Nixon's visit there in 1967 as he geared up for another tilt at the presidency. Once elected, the new president appointed Green as assistant secretary of state for East Asia, and immediately dispatched him to all corners of the region to take soundings from key allies. He was given a wide brief: in effect to give content to Nixon's ideas — first expressed in *Foreign Affairs* in October 1967 — about what a post-Vietnam Asia might look like. Green's report following that mission observed that "our ability to help will depend to an important extent upon what countries of the area are doing to help themselves and their neighbours."

But there was no regional clamour for the US to leave, Green noting that "virtually all East Asian leaders stressed that premature or excessive withdrawal of US strength could prove disastrous." Yet in a climate of worsening news from Vietnam and growing public disillusionment in America, Green's message found its mark. As he wrote:

Americans feel that they are carrying a disproportionate share

of the burden for military security ... in areas which, while important to the US, are nevertheless distant. They are asking more and more frequently what other countries are doing to help themselves and to help each other. This mood is intensified by concern over our deepening problems at home'.

Green had set out the basic parameters of what would come to be known as the Nixon doctrine — pronounced by the president on the tiny Pacific island of Guam in late July 1969. That statement affirmed that the US would not get involved in another land war in Asia and, moreover, that its regional allies had to provide more for their own self-defence. Treaty commitments would be maintained, but the implications were clear: future American involvement in the region would be of a different order. In essence, the statement on Guam was a signal that the US was abandoning the worldwide struggle against communism. Washington could no longer be the world's policeman, and American power was beyond its prime.

Culling some Cold War shibboleths was part and parcel of this adjustment. In a private address to American chiefs of mission in Asia around the same time, Nixon himself confided that "the way the war ends in Vietnam will have an enduring impact on events, although the domino concept is not necessarily valid." What concerned him the most was the feeling that "we should get out of Asia at all costs", a temptation he rejected. He feared an "escalation of not just get-out-of-Vietnam sentiment but-get-of the-world sentiment. And this would be disastrous." The key issue, he stressed, was "how to overcome US disenchantment with Vietnam and growing doubts about our involvement in the world."

Nixon was feeling his way towards a new way of speaking about America's role, one that was less prone to singing the praises of US pre-eminence and predominance. In something of a rare clarion call to the diplomatic corps, he added: "If I were in the foreign service, I

would choose Asia to serve in ... In Asia you have more opportunity to shape the outcome of events than anywhere else on this globe."

The Nixon doctrine was all the more alarming to Australian leaders because without the presence of US troops on the ground in South-East Asia, Australia was back to where it had been prior to the Vietnam war: namely profoundly uncertain about what kind of protection the ANZUS security treaty afforded it. Yet Green also saw Australia as something of an exemplar for other regional allies. "The new sense of vigour in Australia" he told secretary of state William Rogers in 1972, "can be used to advantage in utilising Australia's leadership to strengthen regional cohesion and self-help as visualised in the Nixon doctrine." And this too was how Australian Labor Party leader Gough Whitlam had interpreted the American statement, seeing it as an opportunity for Australia to shed the "stultifying" rigidities of the Cold War and define a more independent role for the nation within and without the US alliance.

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And yet the election of the Whitlam government witnessed a rapid and dramatic deterioration in the alliance relationship, typified by the strident criticism by senior Labor ministers of the December 1972 Christmas bombings, but also on account of the fact that Whitlam pulled out the remaining military advisers from Vietnam and threatened to abandon the South-East Asia Treaty Organization. According to Green, Nixon apparently felt as if "our great, staunch ally had opted out of the war." At the time, Australia was reported to

be second only to Sweden on Nixon's so-called "shit-list", and the president ordered that nobody at the rank of assistant secretary or above could meet with any Australian officials, including the ambassador, then Sir James Plimsoll. It is important to recall that American national security officials in this period were prone to label Australian public statements on foreign policy as "gaffes" or "monstrosities". Green circumvented Nixon's ban by visiting Plimsoll at his own house.

Some Australians treated Green's appointment as the new American ambassador in early 1973 as something of a "trophy". "We got Marshall Green" was the boast of one official in the foreign affairs department: more used, no doubt, to the usual roll call of presidential associates and bag handlers that normally secured the Australian post. Others saw it as an "early pay off from Australia's changed attitude towards the US."

But another explanation is more convincing. Green and Nixon's national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, did not always see eye to eye. Green's opposition to the idea of a US ground invasion of Cambodia in 1970 hardly helped his cause. Originally thought to be the next logical appointment as ambassador in Japan, Green was instead sent to handle the Australian problem. The tension between these two policymakers clearly lingered. In an oral history interview in 1995, Green remarked that Kissinger had no "depth of knowledge about East Asia — none" and that "his failure to draw upon the expertise of people who had spent their lives working on East Asia was a great mistake on his part." He recalled that being "cut out of things" was particularly problematic: "Kissinger knew that you didn't have the complete picture, and therefore he tended to discredit your views accordingly." Whitlam believed that "Kissinger resented Green's professional expertise and verbal brilliance", contending that the appointment was to remove the diplomat as another source of advice to Nixon. Although Green made all the right noises when he arrived

in Australia about having specifically chosen the Canberra post for himself, within two months he was in Kissinger's office in the White House requesting that he be reassigned back to Washington.

Green's plea to come home reflected in part the fact that he had so quickly mended a somewhat rickety alliance fence. First, he had secured Whitlam a much-prized invitation to see Nixon, after the president had for five months steadfastly refused to open the Oval Office to the Labor leader. Moreover, Green had assuaged Whitlam's concerns about the purpose and function of American bases in Australia. A series of disputes and divergences over Asia policy continued to rile relations. In essence, though, Green kept faith with the policy he had recommended in the late 1960s, namely that Washington and Canberra need not necessarily march together "in lock-step, against the forces of darkness".

That in itself confirmed Green's acceptance — as it had for Nixon — that the turning away from certain Cold war orthodoxies necessarily involved toning down the grandiloquent rhetoric and missions of the past. With the changing circumstances, there could be no more lofty rhetoric about an American century. During his tenure as ambassador in Australia, Green even pointedly rejected the notion, as expressed in John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, that America had a special mission to promote freedom across the globe. Green confessed that it was "hard to conceive of a more sweeping declaration of commitment to the world spoken by a president just elected by the narrowest of margins." While Americans would

> *...still wish to carry out the burden of this message ... we have come to see a serious flaw in an approach that suggests the business of America is world leadership. Leadership is to be shared. Burdens and responsibilities are to be shared ... it is far beyond the means and capabilities of any one country to shoulder all these responsibilities; and it is far beyond the*

wisdom of any one country to supply by itself the answers and solutions to world problems.

That too had consequences for alliance partners. By the end of his posting in 1975, Green had declared publicly that Harold Holt's policy of "All the way with LBJ" was a "downright embarrassment" to Australia. But to the very end, he was ever the analyst, opining to the British High Commissioner in October 1974 that the Whitlam government had "from six months to a year" before it would fall, since it had no policy to combat inflation. Although he believed a successor Liberal–Country party government would be no more successful in this regard, he wondered whether it "would open the way to a much more extreme Labor government thereafter". It showed how much the Whitlam experience had stung the American diplomatic mind.

Writing confidentially to Kissinger in July 1975, Green summarised in one sentence the essence of the policy dilemma he had encountered over the previous two years: "one of our biggest problems in Australia", he mused, was "complacency. Paradoxically, the Indochina debacle, inflation, and unemployment have helped make Australians increasingly aware of their dependence on outside developments and of their reliance upon the United States." The Whitlam government had "providentially matured in its views." But this too spoke to a certain American misreading of Whitlam and his intentions. It showed that America's encouragement of national self-reliance in Asia had its own limits. Whitlam never advocated the abrogation of the alliance, yet so many in Washington saw his policies as a dangerous flirtation with neutrality, if not flippant anti-Americanism.

What guidance, then, can Marshall Green offer in today's flammable world of north-east Asian affairs? Former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski noted recently that the media's depiction of Obama's rebalancing of American foreign policy towards Asia as a

"pivot" (with the salient reminder that the President himself has never used the word) misses the point that it was "only meant to be a constructive reaffirmation of the unchanged reality that the US is both a Pacific and Atlantic power." That might be so, but few would quibble that the challenges facing policymakers in Washington and Canberra arising from the rise of China present challenges of a different order to those the US has faced in the past. And the White House still faces an equally formidable set of regional flashpoints — not least with North Korean sabre rattling, persistent Sino-Japanese antagonism, and lingering India–Pakistan tensions. Moreover, the psychological and political effects of modernisation, and their resulting consequences for nationalism, are still very much at play across Asia.

Green saw both sides of this problem: that just as much as this new spirit of national self-confidence could be a force for cohesion, the divisive nationalism of Asian leaders like Mao, Rhee, and Sukarno could also be employed to brutally consolidate power at home while making enemies abroad.

At a critical time in American foreign relations, Marshall Green recognised that the best role the US could play in Asia was not that of roving policeman, but stabiliser. It is a role many regional allies look to Washington to play today, despite the message now, as then, that America needs first and foremost to tend to pressing domestic challenges. Of course, no one bureaucratic career, speech, or presidential doctrine from the past can point a sure way ahead: history has a habit of springing surprises. But the path can surely be illuminated by a surer grasp of the history of America's regional embrace in the post-war era and those who crafted its course. ■