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## **ORIENTALISM AND POST-COLONIAL READING OF THE U.S. POLICY TOWARD INDONESIA DURING NIXON ADMINISTRATION**

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### **Abstract**

Through the examination of documents pertaining to the United States policies toward Indonesia, this paper studies how Washington viewed Indonesia almost three decades after colonialism had been officially over. More specifically, this paper studies U.S. assistance programs provided for Indonesia during the administration of President Richard M. Nixon. By using the perspective of postcolonial studies on international relations, it shows that while on the surface the assistance programs of the Nixon administration appeared to be altruistic and helpful, a deeper look at them shows that the programs were imbued with subliminal Eurocentric liberal international theory of international relations. It further shows that the administration's programs were not only self-serving, but were also implemented with an orientalist spirit by the United States as part of the "superior" West over Indonesia that was considered part of the East and therefore was "inferior" and in need of help from the West. In light of Edward Said's postcolonial studies of West and East relations, the policies clearly reflect orientalist views and practices, even long after colonialism formally ended.

**Keywords:** orientalism, English school theory, neoliberal international theory, the Nixon administration, Indonesia

### **Introduction**

During the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969), the United States (US) was hostile toward Indonesia (Robinson, 2018; Roosa, 2020; Wardaya, 2012). Among the reasons for the hostility was Washington's view of President Sukarno as being not only pro-communist but also anti-Western, resulting in the leftist political and economic system that had caused Indonesia's economic troubles. Washington was also unhappy with Sukarno's favorable attitudes toward the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI); his refusal to join the Western side of the Cold War; and his maintaining close relations with the People's Republic of China (Wardaya, 2007). In the eyes of Washington, Sukarno's actions were an indication of his opposition to the U.S. Washington then began to seek ways to undermine President Sukarno and his leftist supporters

while hoping to replace President Sukarno with a pro-Western leader, as shown by a sizeable body of research (e.g. Clark & Mortimer, 1975; Hess, 1974; Taylor, 2019).

A great opportunity for the US to turn tables in Indonesia came when beginning in mid-1965, and following the accusation that the PKI was launching a move to take over the government, between 500 thousand and one million members and sympathizers of the communist party were massacred (Robinson, 2018). Many more were imprisoned and exiled, while the party was destroyed and officially banned (Roosa, 2020). When in 1967 General Suharto officially took over power from President Sukarno in the wake of the mass violence, Washington was pleased and took a different approach toward Indonesia. It changed course from being hostile to Indonesia into being friendly toward it (Easter, 2010; Simpson, 2020; Bevins, 2020). Washington began to fully support the government of President Suharto. The support became more explicit when in the US the administration of S. President Johnson ended and was succeeded by the administration of President Richard M. Nixon of 1969-1974.

Under the Nixon administration, Washington provided various assistance programs to help the pro-Western government of President Suharto. Among the assistance programs were: (a) building close personal relations between President Nixon and President Suharto; (b) supporting the Suharto government in its effort to diminish the influence of President Sukarno in Indonesian politics; (c) helping Indonesia through the Paris Club, a consortium of Western nations that would provide loan for Indonesia; (d) using international institutions to help the Suharto government re-build Indonesia's economy; and (e) encouraging the Suharto government to play greater role in Southeast Asia.

That being said, this present study would argue that President Nixon's policy has orientalist predispositions, i.e. Indonesia remains the subordinate Other in the US-Indonesia relation. In his foundational work *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that for a long period of time Europe and the West in general described people outside the Western world (also known as the "East" or the "Orient") in a specific way. They mostly depicted the people of the so-called East as "irrational, psychologically weak, and feminized" (Said, 2003). According to Said, such a depiction of the people of the Orient helped the West to dominate and colonize non-Western people. Following the end of the colonial period at the conclusion of the Second World War, Western domination continued, including the domination that was done by the United States (Said, 2003, p. 18). In the absence of formal colonization, he further argues, the West continues to exploit the human and natural resources of non-Western nations to serve its own purposes (Said, 2003).

In explaining the scope of orientalism, Said states that orientalism encompasses different dimensions, which are interdependent of each other. Other than being an academic field and "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and ... 'the Occident'", according to Said, orientalism is also "as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 2003, pp. 2-3). He believes that, again, these dimensions of orientalism continued to influence the West's views and practices after the end of colonialism or the post-colonial period. For Said this is clearly reflected in the fact that even after the age of colonialism was formally over, "[t]he relationship between Occident and Orient is

a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony...”(Said, 2003, p. 5).

Implementing Said’s views on the West’s attitudes toward non-European nations, (Hobson, (2012) argues that such approach and attitudes were continued to be implemented in Western nations’ diplomatic relations with the people outside the Western world. According to Hobson, during the pre-1945 period the dominant international relations theories were explicitly Eurocentric, in which Europe was depicted as the main source of ideas for modern international system, known as the “Eurocentric Big-Bang theory of world politics”. In the post-1945 period the explicit Eurocentric theory was abandoned. It was replaced by what Hobson later construes as the liberal international theory.

Although the liberal international theory abandoned explicit Eurocentrism, according to Hobson, in practice it continues to carry remnants of the explicit Eurocentrism, albeit subliminally, hence “subliminal eurocentrism” (Hobson, 2012, p. 214). Thus, Hobson continues, although in the liberal international theory “there is no explicit discussion of ‘civilizations versus barbarians’, or of ‘whites versus non-whites’,” in practice “the traditional civilization/barbarism discourse is sublimated rather than exorcized” (Hobson, 2012, p. 214). Within the liberal international theory itself, as reported by Hobson, there are two more-specific theories, namely English School theory and the Neo-liberal Institutional theory. While the English School theory is explicitly Eurocentric, the Neoliberal Institutional theory carries Eurocentrism subliminally, through supporting European-initiated international institutions (Hobson, 2012, pp. 215–216).

With regard to the English School theory of international relations (henceforth ES), Hobson provides some key features. In general, the ES tends to award the East “various degrees of agency”, but “these are always inferior to the pioneering agency that is awarded to the West.” More specifically, the East is “awarded emulative ‘conditional agency’ whereby it assimilates the institutions and practices that were pioneered by the Europeans as they were delivered courtesy of the Western civilizing mission, ultimately so that the East could join, and therefore enjoy the benefits of, Western international society.” Further, the ES awards the East “a degree of ‘predatory agency’, ... in which the refusal to fully Westernize gives rise to the contemporary ‘Eastern problem’ that in turn destabilizes both global international society/world order and Western civilization” (Hobson, 2012, pp. 214–215). According to Hobson, ES theory “visualizes IR through the Eurocentric ‘big-bang theory’ of world politics.” By using the big-bang theory, adherents of ES believe that “Europe pioneered development and self-generated through the Eurocentric logic of immanence before exporting its institutions (via imperialism) to the East in order to remake the world as far as possible in its own image” (Hobson 2012: 215).

Concerning the Neoliberal Institutional theory (henceforth NLI), Hobson explains that it “...does not openly advocate imperialism and ostensibly rejects it” (Hobson, 2012, p. 216). However, he suggests that “a paternalist conception of neo-imperialism creeps in through the [NLI’s] sub-liminal Eurocentric back door” (Hobson, 2012, p. 216). He further argues that by adherents of NLI “key international institutions are portrayed as paternalist Western vehicles” needed to help “the cultural conversion of Third World states to Western liberal-civilizational precepts” (Hobson, 2012, p. 216). According to Hobson, NLI

adherents do not usually discuss “the rise of the West and the rise of the Western state, given the theory’s lack of interest in historical international systems.” Instead they prefer to discuss “Western states as fully formed and then considers how they subsequently come together to create and reproduce the major international institutions through iterated cooperation” (Hobson, 2012, pp. 215–216)

Using Hobsonian postcolonial approach of the liberal international theory, this paper intends to show that despite their altruistic impression, in practice Washington’s assistance programs were self-serving. More importantly this paper will show that the assistance programs were conducted with orientalist approach, in which the U.S. perceived itself as part of the “superior” West, while perceiving Indonesia as part of the “inferior” East. This paper will further show that when viewed from the perspective of postcolonial studies of international relations, the Nixon administration’s assistance programs were permeated with features of the English School theory and the Neoliberal Institutional theory of international relations. This study will use these features to observe elements within the assistance program carried out by the Nixon administration in its relations with Indonesia.

## **Method**

This study is a qualitative research using document analysis method (Bowen, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2012; Rapley, 2011). Document analysis method is “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). As further stated by Bowen, “[I]like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). The analytic procedure of this paper involves “finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesizing data contained in documents” (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). The research results are then organized into major themes, categories, and case examples specifically through content analysis (Bowen, 2009; Labuschagne, 2003). In this current study, the data gained were interpreted using Hobson’s liberal international relations theory with its two branches, namely the English School theory and the Neoliberal Institutional theory.

As for the data source, they were procured from an archival research on documents stored at the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, California, USA and at the National Archives, College Parks, Maryland, USA, in 2014 and 2017 respectively. The documents are memoranda of conversation among foreign-policy makers, diplomatic memos and diplomatic communication pertaining to policies of the United States under President Nixon toward Indonesia under the government of President Suharto.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This section details the five features of the US-Indonesia international relation using Hobson’s theories outlined above.

### ***Granting the East with “emulative” or “conditional” agency***

According to Hobson, the ES theory grants the East with “emulative” or “conditional” agency. By this he suggests that the ES theory regards the East as being keen on imitating and reproducing political values and institutions that had been produced by the West, even after the success of the decolonization process. This view makes the adherents of the ES theory confident that all the political values and institutions of the West are also good for the East (Hobson, 2012; Watson, 1987).

Applied on the case of US-Indonesian relations during the Nixon administration, one can see that such a view was present, albeit implicitly. A document titled “Briefing Book for Nixon Trip to Indonesia” clearly reflects such a view when it describes Suharto as a political leader from the East, in this case from Indonesia. The document describes the Indonesian president as having “*limited experience as a statesman*” while declaring that “*he is still a bit unsure of himself in the world arena.*”(NARA/National Archives and Record Administration, Document No. 690709, 1969, p.3). Based on this observation President Nixon’s policymakers suggested that the US President should build *a personal relationship* with Suharto (“NARA Document No. 690203, ‘Memo for Kissinger on Indo Econ Performance and US Aid,’” 1969). They believed that a close personal relations between the two leaders would provide “reinforcement for achieving understanding and cooperation on range of USG-GOI [United States Government-Government of Indonesia] relationships.”(NARA Document No. 690816, 1969, p. 3). Seen from the ES theory what the policymakers’s belief implies that through personal relationship with Nixon, Suharto would be able to emulate the American President in conducting affairs in international political arena while strengthening US-Indonesian relations.

In the document, the policymakers also urged President Nixon to “encourage Indonesia to continue its sound internal economic policies”. For these officials, the “economic policies” were certainly the same economic policies that the US was using, namely the capitalist economic policies. By imitating the US in using the capitalist economic policies these policymakers believed that Indonesia would be economically prosper just like the US. Implicitly they also suggested that Indonesia should abandon the populist or socialist economic policies that had been implemented by President Sukarno. Such a belief, in turn, reflected what Hobson says about the English School theory’s feature of seeing the East as imitator of Western political values and institutions of the West.

### ***Viewing the East as a “predatory” agency***

Hobson argues that the ES theory grants the East not only with emulative or conditional agency, but also with “predatory” agency, especially to Eastern leaders who refused to embrace Western political values and institutions. As further explained by Hobson, ES theorists believe that Eastern leaders refused those values and institutions eventually caused problems not only for their respective states but also for the political world order in general (Hobson, 2012, pp. 214–215).

In the case of US-Indonesian relations, such a view was clearly reflected in the Nixon administration’s regard for President Sukarno. In the administration’s view, Sukarno was an Eastern leader who rejected Western political values and

institutions as shown in Sukarno's refusal to join the Western side of the Cold War, and therefore the administration regarded him as a "predatory" agency. Sukarno was also viewed as rejecting Western political values and institutions by adopting populist economic system while building close relations with communist nations (such as with People's republic of China) and preventing Western corporations to invest in Indonesia. As a result, in the view of the ES theory, Sukarno was causing various problems. Among the problems were Indonesia's "shattered economy", the creation of "*communism as a domestic political force*" and irresponsible regional cooperation and leadership in Southeast Asia, as one document entitled "Indonesia Annual Policy Review and Assessment" dated February 16, 1970 shows (NARA Document No.700216, 1970, p. 2).

It was not surprising then, that in light of such a view the Nixon administration was willingly supporting the Suharto government in the effort to diminish Sukarno's influence in Indonesian politics—an effort often called de-Sukarnoization campaign (Adam, 2018). Trusting that the chief of the lingering support for Sukarno's influence came from the Navy branch of the Indonesian armed forces, the the policymakers of the Nixon administration were pleased that "*the purge of pro-Sukarno military leader currently underway in Jakarta is primarily aimed at settling old scores dating back to the Sukarno period and at removing elements, mainly from the Indonesia Navy, with potential for future disloyalty*" (NARA Document No.700122, 1970. p. 1). These officials were hoping that the de-Sukarnoization campaign was "*intended in the longer term to prepare the groundwork for an Army victory in the 1971 elections by completing the process of de-Sukarnoization...*" (NARA Document No. 700122, 1970, p. 1), in which the Army was considered more emulative toward the political values and institutions of the West since many of their officers had been trained in the U.S. In ES theory's term, the Indonesian Army was a potential "emulative" or "conditional" agency of the East.

The Nixon administration's policymakers believed that by replacing Sukarno the predatory agency with President Suharto as an emulative agency, Indonesia would become in tune with U.S. interests and policies in Indonesia itself as well as with U.S. interests and policies in the Southeast Asian region. Stated in one of the administration's documents called "Indonesia Annual Policy Review and Assessment", dated February 16, 1970 as follows:

With the replacement of Sukarno regime by a government under General Suharto, Indonesia has reversed directions and is now seeking, with some early success, to rebuild its shattered economy, to attract foreign investment, to eradicate communism as a domestic political force and to play a responsible role in regional cooperation and leadership (No.700216, 1970, p. 2).

While Sukarno as the "predatory" agency was associated with "shattered economy", Suharto as the "emulative" agency was expected not only to attract foreign capitals, but also to save Indonesia from communism and to make Indonesia open itself for collaborations with other pro-U.S. Southeast Asian nations.

### ***Implementing Subliminal Eurocentrism***

Hobson observes that the ES theory often views relations between West and East by using “Eurocentric ‘big-bang theory’ of world politics.” In light of this view, ES theorists believed that the West had endeavored to assimilate “the institutions and practices that were pioneered by the Europeans” and “delivered courtesy of the Western civilizing mission” to the East. The purpose of the West in this endeavor, in the view of the same ES theorists, is to make the East able “to join, and therefore enjoy the benefits of, Western international society” (Hobson, 2012, p 214).

Implemented in the case of US-Indonesian relations during the Nixon administration, such a view was evident when the administration joined the so-called “Paris Club” in an effort to help Indonesia’s economic recovery. Paris Club was a consortium of mostly-European nations based in Paris, France, intended to provide loans for Indonesia. In return, members of the “club” expected to be given access to invest their capital in Indonesia and to extract Indonesia’s natural resources. The administration viewed the club as part of “the ‘institutions and practices that were pioneered by the Europeans’ and wanted to join it in order to help deliver the ‘courtesy of the Western civilizing mission’, in this case to Indonesia, and Orient nation. Indeed, the developed countries’ urban design for Latin American and Asian countries post-1945 was helpful albeit its Orientalizing tendencies as shown by members of the Paris Club (Feridhanusetyawan & Pangestu, 2003; Hebbert, 2012).

Guided by such a view, President Nixon’s advisers suggested that in order for the U.S. to help Indonesia recover from its economic instability, “we [*the U.S.*] participate fully with the ‘Paris Club’ of Indonesia’s creditors.”(NARA Document No. 690709, “Briefing Book for Nixon Trip to Indonesia” p. 10.). The participation was important, according to the advisers, because it would give opportunity for “*other developed nations*” to help Indonesia in the country’s economic recovery efforts. What they meant by “other developed nations” were certainly European nations. In other words these advisers were believers in the hyper-agency of Europe as the best solution for the problems of the emulative or conditional agency of the East. The attitudes of the advisers in turn, reflecting Hobson’s contention that in the NLI theory of international relations, “a paternalist conception of neo-imperialism” which, according to Hobson, “creeps in through the subliminal Eurocentric back door” (Hobson, 2012, p. 216).

### ***Approving International Institutions as Paternalist Western Vehicles***

Hobson argues that in the eyes of the NLI theory adherents “key international institutions are portrayed as paternalist Western vehicles” which was necessary to help “the cultural conversion of Third World states to Western liberal-civilizational precepts” (Hobson, 2012, p. 216). In other words, NLI theorists support the idea of urging nations of the East to adhere to the policies of international institutions that are created by the West.

In the case of US-Indonesian relations during the Nixon administration, this was clear from the US participation in (therefore support for) the Paris Club mentioned above. The Paris Club was seen as a “key international institution” and was utilized to urge Indonesia as a Third World state to embrace the precepts of the West to becoming “liberal-civilizational” in the footsteps of the Western

nations. Along this line, the Nixon administration paternalistically believed that “aid donors, foreign investors and the various international institutions” of the West will best cure Indonesia’s economic woes (NARA Document No. 690203, “Memo for Kissinger on Indo Econ Performance and US Aid”, February 3, 1969, p. 7.). The US also urged a similar international institution, namely the IGGI (Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia), to collaborate and help Indonesia (NARA Document No.700216, 1970). Like the Paris Club, the IGGI was an association of multilateral governments of mostly Western nations, except Japan, that provided loans for Indonesia under Suharto to rebuild the country’s economy. Members of the IGGI included Japan, England, France, Australia, West Germany, Italy and the US itself.

Although not publicly announced, some hidden political motives were also involved. “*Our major objective in the political sector*”, a report said, “*is a friendly and cooperative government which has a reasonable degree of support from the people*” (NARA Document No. 700216, “Indonesia Annual Policy Review and Assessment”, February 16, 1970, p. 2). Meanwhile, “*in the socio-cultural sector, our [US] primary objective is the acceleration of modernization within a value structure compatible with our own*” (No.700216, 1970, p. 1).

### **Supporting International Cooperation**

Hobson also argues that in addition to approving international institutions as paternalist western vehicles NLI theorists also view “Western states as fully formed and then considers how they subsequently come together to create and reproduce the major international institutions through iterated cooperation” (Hobson, 2012, pp. 215–216).

The formation of Paris Club and the IGGI to remedy Indonesia’s economic stability mentioned above clearly indicate such a view. Both institutions were international in nature, and together as fellow members of the “superior” West, they iterated cooperation among themselves in order to solve problems of the “inferior” East, in this case Indonesia (National Archives, 1969).

The cooperation, however, was not merely to benefit the East. It was also to benefit the West itself. As stated in a document from the Nixon administration titled “Indonesia Annual Policy Review and Assessment”, among the aims of such international cooperation was to open Indonesia:

to American trade and investment, by encouraging the effective use of foreign, including U.S., economic assistance; ...to encourage and improve the climate for the growth of private investment, both foreign and domestic, as a major contribution to over-all economic development; ... to insure that Indonesia is a good trading partner of the United States. (NARA Document No.700216, 1970, p.1.)

Some political motives were also involved. “*Our major objective in the political sector*”, the document also stated, “*is a friendly and cooperative government which has a reasonable degree of support from the people*”. Meanwhile, it was further states that “*in the socio-cultural sector, our [US] primary objective is the acceleration of modernization within a value structure compatible with our own.*”(NARA Document No.700216, 1970, p. 2)

Even within the East itself, the US wanted to encourage Indonesia to initiate international cooperation under the frame of US international politics. This was

clear especially when the Nixon administration provided military assistance for the Suharto government. The assistance was intended for “the eventual cooperation of Indonesia with its neighbors in maintaining their collective and individual security.” (NARA Document No.700216, 1970, p. 2). In other words, military assistance to Indonesia was important to “*assure Indonesian competence to maintain internal security and to encourage Indonesia’s interest in a responsible role in the security of the area friendly to U.S. interests*” (NARA Document No.700216, 1970, p. 2). Because of that reason the administration was convinced that the US “*should plan and implement a slightly enlarged program of military assistance...*” (NARA Document No.700216, 1970, p. 2).

Hobson himself dislikes the precepts of the English School and the Neoliberal Institutional theories of the international relations. However, by employing his depiction of the features of the two theories, this paper has shown that the U.S. policies toward Indonesia during the Nixon Administration clearly reflect features of both the English School and Neoliberal Institutional theories. It also became clear that despite the altruistic appearance of the administration’s policies (and the policies of the West in general) toward Indonesia, when looked from the perspective of the post-colonial international relations they show the signs of West’s attempts to continue dominate the East, even after colonialism officially ended. In the specific case of the Nixon administration’s “helps” and “assistance” for the Suharto government, we can see that the help and assistance were also motivated by the desire to perpetuate Western domination over Indonesia, albeit subliminally.

## Conclusion

This study has shown the orientalist crux of US-Indonesia relations following Hobson’s English School and the Neoliberal Institutional theories as parts of the liberal international theory of international relations between the West and the East in the post-colonial period. Viewed from the perspective of postcolonial studies of international relations, the Nixon administration’s assistance programs were marked with features of the ES and NLI theories of East-West relations. These features include: considering the East as “emulative” or “conditional” agency; regarding the East as “predatory” agency; harboring subliminal Eurocentrism; approving international institutions as paternalist Western vehicles to exploit the East; and viewing international cooperation as a legitimate way for the West’s domination over the East.

This study has also shown that the anti-Indonesian attitudes of the American policymakers during the government of the Indonesian President Sukarno took a different path in the wake of the anti-communist purge and the removal of the president in mid-1960s. When President Suharto came to power, and especially during President Richard Nixon administration, Washington became very supportive of the Indonesian government. The support included building personal relations between President Nixon and President Suharto; assisting Suharto in the “de-Sukarnoization” efforts; helping rebuilt Indonesian economy; helping Indonesian to join international financial institutions; and helping Indonesia play greater role in Southeast Asia.

Finally, seen from Saidian postcolonial studies, the policies of the U.S. under the administration of President Nixon clearly reflected orientalist views and

practices, despite the fact that colonialism had for so long disappeared. Therefore, this study suggests future research to pursue either by refuting such notions or examining the same issue from the perspective of the so-called “East” itself.

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