

Book Reviews

Southeast Asia

Hard interests, soft illusions: Southeast Asia and American power

By NATASHA HAMILTON-HART

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Natasha Hamilton-Hart explores the relationship between ‘interests’ and ‘illusions’ in shaping the foreign policies (towards the United States) of the governments of Southeast Asia. In a book that is both concise and thorough, she focuses on the period from the Cold War to the present and includes Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam in her analysis. She emphasises that in all of these cases ‘beliefs about American power’ flow from specific ‘illusions’ and ‘interests’ that are not necessarily explained by what she describes as ‘common understandings of the sources of foreign policy’. In the case of ‘interests’ that shape different approaches to the United States on the part of politically divergent governments in the region, she emphasises the interests of particular regimes, an established ruling elite or the governing political party of the nation-states concerned. More specifically, she draws attention to the ‘interests’ of political leaders ‘in securing power’ and ‘rewarding supporters’. She also draws attention to the ‘career interests’ of those who are involved in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy towards the United States and the fact that professional or personal considerations may become tied up in various ways with the conduct of diplomacy. Hamilton Hart emphasises that, despite their differences, the region’s ‘non-communist political elites’ have by and large regarded America ‘as a benign power over the last sixty years’ (pp. 9–10). However, if there is a continued relative decline in the ‘economic capacity’ of the United States (a trend that has been at the centre of the Great Recession that began in December 2007 and may or may not have ended, depending on your point of view) its image as a ‘benign hegemon’ could ‘fade’ (p. 191). But, for the moment, despite its changing role since the end of the Cold War until the bombings of September 11 and since, Hamilton-Hart emphasises that there remains a strongly grounded and generally positive view of American power that informs the thinking and actions of the foreign policy elites in Southeast Asia.

Following a short Introduction, which maps out her overall approach, the second chapter focuses on how the various ‘beliefs’ of the political actors and diplomats concerned have interacted with the ‘hard interests’ and ‘soft illusions’ to which she refers in the book’s title. Chapter 3 examines in more detail the political economy of ‘interests’, while chapter 4 examines the question of beliefs (assumptions) that feed into the ‘soft illusions’ via an examination of the writing and rewriting of the various national histories in Southeast Asia and of the history of the United States in the region. She makes clear that in all cases there is a mainstream and widely accepted version of

history, which has been debated to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the nation-state concerned. At the same, these 'mainstream national histories' remain selective and uncritical: they all involve a 'sanitisation of history' producing 'one-sided and confident narratives' that celebrate the overall historical trajectory of particular polities in Southeast Asia in a fashion that is to a lesser or greater degree inclusive depending on the contemporary character of the regime concerned. In this regard, as with 'interests', the foreign policy elites in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia articulate a less overtly contested version of their histories, while Thailand and the Philippines have been characterised by greater debate since the end of the Cold War (if not well before). Not surprisingly, the foreign-policy makers and the political elite in Vietnam hold to a celebratory account of the country's long struggle from nationalist-communist insurgency to national unification and Communist Party rule. While 'official narratives' in the country are not about 'exonerating' the United States and the 'impact of its war against Vietnam' they also reflect contemporary geopolitical perceptions of the United States as crucial to the status quo in the region, at the same time as they emphasise the 'centuries of Chinese hostility', thus representing China as the greater threat both historically and currently. Thus, even in Vietnam, and far more so in the other polities, there is a 'sanitisation of the American role in Southeast Asian history' that is 'in part a product of the selectivity of partisan national history' and feeds into the contemporary hope that the United States will continue to play a stabilising role in the region in relation to China in particular (pp. 132–42).

Meanwhile, the absence or marginalisation of important historical political forces in the various nation-states of the region is addressed in chapter 5, which focuses in some detail on 'professional expertise' as a vehicle for obscuring the 'political nature' of 'policymaker perspectives'. A focus on professionalism by foreign policy elites has ensured that foreign policy discussions are relatively 'devoid of serious political content', which has in turn been facilitated by things such as the 'defeat and silencing of the political Left (or Right, in the case of Vietnam) since the 1960s or earlier'. This 'defeat' provided the 'victors' with 'an apparently uncontested national canvas onto which' they could 'write their own platform' (pp. 143–4). In her short concluding chapter on 'Regime interests, beliefs, and knowledge', Hart-Hamilton reiterates her overall conclusions in relation to elite Southeast Asian views of American power. More broadly, she argues that by examining 'both the "hard interests" of power-holders and the "soft illusions" that sustain beliefs' it is possible to avoid privileging ideological or material causes driving the foreign policy of Southeast Asian nation-states towards the United States. She notes that since the 1960s, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have been 'true believers' with regard to the 'fundamentally benign' character of American power. Thailand and the Philippines, meanwhile, are less easy to categorise: on the one hand the material benefits for successive regimes in both nation-states that have flowed from the connection with the United States are readily apparent; however, the foreign policy elites in these two latter polities are 'more divided'. This is in no small measure a reflection and/or a result of the fact that particularly by the 1970s, the production of knowledge about the United States has been 'more pluralistic' (pp. 12–13). Vietnam's foreign policy, as noted above, is actually relatively generous in terms of its view of the United States, a

perspective that is grounded primarily in the contemporary desire to represent China as a long-standing threat.

Central to the book is her argument that the origins and character of the widespread alignment with the United States are not necessarily a result of the 'international structure of power'. More specifically, the roots of Cold War alignments in the region were, in her view, grounded first and foremost in 'the outcome of domestic political struggles' and the 'sectional interests of contenders for power' who took advantage of 'the "opportunities" that flowed from American anti-communism'. She emphasises that the 'interests' that are most directly served are 'different' from the more sweeping notion of 'national interests' and 'stability' to which foreign policy elites in Southeast Asia often refer. As emphasised at the outset, she sets 'interests' alongside 'illusions', at the same time as her use of the term 'illusion' is not intended to necessarily question the accuracy of particular beliefs, attitudes or assumptions held by foreign-policymakers and diplomats. Furthermore, 'illusions', as she uses the term, are not 'random' or 'accidental', but emerge and are consolidated in the first instance by the 'interests' of political elites and their supporters: 'self interest' filters into the political and policy process in a range of ways. Apart from the impact of a variety of 'interests', she emphasises that the foreign policy process is also 'shaped by a set of knowledge-related constructs that include both 'information and judgments of how to interpret' this information. Although, the basis of 'knowledge-relation constructs' are many, her book examines two major 'sources' in detail. These two concerns are 'national historical narratives' on the one hand and 'professional expertise' as it is understood by the makers of foreign policy on the other hand: as noted earlier she devotes a chapter to each of these topics. She acknowledges the potential for change over time in terms of the character and content of these two factors, especially the way they have in some respects become 'more pluralistic' (depending on the nation-state being considered) over the years. Furthermore, despite change, 'national historical narratives' and 'professional expertise' still need to be analysed and understood insofar as they continue to facilitate the 'formation of beliefs about the United States as a mostly benign power' (pp. 10–11, also see p. 191).

This book will be of interest to specialists in Southeast Asian politics and international relations. It is a good example of a tightly focused monograph and a sustained effort to explain elite political perceptions of the United States in the six nation-states of Southeast Asia selected for discussion by the author. In fact, if there is a criticism to be made, as far as this reviewer is concerned at least, it is that Hamilton-Hart's book does not follow through in relation to the wider implications of her analysis: i.e., it retains a tight geographical focus at the same time as it does not, at any point, make a sustained effort to come to broader conclusions about the production of knowledge and its relationship to national, regional and international power except in passing. It would be churlish, however, to fault the book for what it does not set out to do. At the end of the day this is an exemplary effort to answer an important question about foreign-policymaking and elite perceptions of the United States in Cold War and post-Cold War Southeast Asia.

MARK T. BERGER

Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey