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Matthew Foley. *The Cold War and National Assertion in Southeast Asia: Britain, the United States and Burma, 1948-1962.* London: Routledge, 2010. 216 S. ISBN 978-0-203-86408-1.

Anne L. Foster. *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 241 S. $79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4786-6; $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4800-9.

Nicholas Tarling. *Southeast Asia and the Great Powers.* Oxon: Routledge, 2010. 272 S. ISBN 978-0-415-55238-7; ISBN 978-0-203-86500-2.

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Sammelrez: International Histories of Southeast Asia

For long periods of its history, Southeast Asia was almost entirely under the formal rule of outside powers. It took the Second World War and the destruction of the entire Western imperial edifice by another external power â Japan â to bring about the onset of decolonization and the attendant development of regionalism. But even as the newly-independent states forged new relationships among themselves to reduce the potential for foreign intervention â their efforts culminating in the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the regionâs most enduring organization to date â they were unable to completely insulate the region from the play of outside forces for long. Why did Southeast Asia hold such an abiding interest for these external powers and how did their involvement affect the course of Southeast Asian history?

In *Southeast Asia and the Great Powers*, the renowned historian Nicholas Tarling surveys the role of external powers in order to shed light on âwhat had interested great powers in the region in the past and what had involved them thereâ (p. 2). Basing his examination on a study of nine âgreat powersâ â beginning with India, and then Britain, France, Japan, Russia, the United States (US), and China, before concluding with a segment on Australia and New Zealand â Tarling concludes that âthe interest of these great powers in Southeast Asia since the late 18th century has almost always been limitedâ (p. 8) and that it was their rivalry elsewhere that often intensified their involvement in the region (p. 221). This was true of imperialist powers like Britain, which had, at least

until the late 19th century, âlittle intrinsic interestâ in Southeast Asia (p. 43). Already burdened by its empire in India, Britain assiduously avoided establishing another territorial empire in the region until the changed circumstances of the Pacific War brought about the belated foisting in its aftermath of formal colonial rule over its dependencies in Malaya and Borneo. The same was true of France, whose imperialist interest in Indochina was ânever strongâ and its colonial enterprise undertaken principally for prestige reasons (p. 92). American interests in the region âhad also always been limited and largely indirectâ (p. 136), and the US had become a reluctant colonial power only after its acquisition of the Philippines in the course of the war of 1898 with Spain. All three powers became more deeply involved in Southeast Asia principally because of the spread of the Cold War to Asia. As France faltered, American commitment, particularly in Vietnam, escalated after Washington feared that Indochina, like China, could be âlostâ to communism (p. 90). Britain saw Southeast Asia as a region in which nation-states would counter communism and sought not only the involvement of the US but also to influence its policy against another international war (p. 82). Likewise, it was the Cold War and its desire to contain China after the Sino-Soviet split from the 1960s that drew Russia more directly into the region after the war. It initially had âno direct interest in Southeast Asiaâ (p. 114) and developed a âlimited and intermittent interest in the regionâ (p. 134) only because it sought to rally the colonial countries against the capitalist bloc in its world-wide ideological struggle against the West after the success of the Bolshevik revolution.

Of Tarlingâs three Asian powers, India stood out for lacking an âimperial enterpriseâ (p. 16). Notwithstanding this, the subcontinentâs influence on the region had since historical times been more cultural than political and only rarely did early Indian empires undertake political intervention in Southeast Asia. Itself the object of foreign intervention and rule from the 19th century to 1947, independent India was naturally sympathetic to the anticolonial aspirations of its regional neighbours and offered its moral and diplomatic support wherever solicited but Indiaâs economic weakness restricted its capacity to become more involved in Southeast Asian affairs (p. 41). Among the Asian powers, only Japan succeeded in bringing the entire region âunder the rule of one power for the first and only timeâ. Even so, Tarling maintains that Japan âmight well not have conquered Southeast Asia but for the impact of the war elsewhereâ as it had âno coherent policy for the regionâ (p. 113). Geographical proximity and historical connexions, on the other hand, made China âin some sense a Southeast Asian powerâ (p. 164) with abiding interests in the region. Its ties, particularly with the mainland states, predated the others. But the prospective hegemonâs size, recent âriseâ, and its steely assertiveness in the South China Sea, where it had been enmeshed in territorial disputes with its Southeast Asian neighbours, invariably provoked much speculation about how it will use its power in future. Big as it is, would China act responsibly as a member of the international community â or would its newfound muscle transform it into a regional bully?

Though Tarlingâs list of âgreat powersâ certainly encompasses the regionâs former imperialist powers, it also includes those which were not. Tarling, however, does not define what he denotes by âgreat powersâ. India, he reckons, could not be âconsidered in terms of a great powerâ (p. 16) and yet it appears first on his list. Presumably the candidates were chosen for their historical connexions with the region or their past or current influence. If historical involvement is a criterion for selection, the omission of the Netherlands from the line-up appears conspicuous by its absence, given the latterâs longstanding colonial commitment in what is now Indonesia. Of course, Amsterdamâs position in the region today is hardly on the same scale as before. The same could perhaps be said of Britain and France, âgreat powersâ in their heydays but whose influence in the region today is no longer as âgreatâ as before. Concluding his survey with a chapter on Australia and New Zealand might also seem âquestionableâ (p. 197) given Tarlingâs consideration of the former as only a âmiddle-ranking powerâ and the latter as âundeniably a minor powerâ (p. 201). Nevertheless, he defends his choice by maintaining that that the antipodean dominions were actually closer to the region than most of the other external powers and that they had not only been actively involved in the security and stability of the region for reasons of their own âforward defenceâ (p. 198), but had also sought to influence the role the great powers played. Probably not all those listed would, strictly speaking, fall into the category of âgreat powersâ, ill-defined though the term might be.

Overall, the book provides a fitting âepilogueâ to Tarlingâs sequential trilogy of his earlier works â *Imperialism in Southeast Asia* (2001), *Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (2004) and *Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (2006). If there is a lesson to be drawn from Tarlingâs expansive study, it is that the efficacy of the current stage of region-building depends on not only the exertions of Southeast Asian themselves but also on the interests of outside

powers. If History offers any guide, it is that divisions within the region would only offer invitations and opportunities for intervention from outside â and that would inadvertently affect the success of regionalism. For students of the international history of Southeast Asia, this informative book spanning a period of over two centuries is a valuable resource written by an acknowledged expert in the field.

Anne Fosterâs *Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941*, focuses on a less sweeping, but no less important, theme and period â American colonial thinking and interactions with the European powers in Southeast Asia during the interwar period. Foster argues that although the US, after 1898, had joined the ranks of colonial powers in Southeast Asia â just like the British, French and Dutch â it did not to want to be closely associated with what it saw was an outmoded European colonial system operating in the region. Driven in part by the confident belief in the superiority of the more progressive American colonial model developed in the Philippines and which its officials believed were applicable region-wide, and the profitability of American-style capitalism, the US at the outset aggressively pursued policies it believed would not only be transformative for the region but also secure the strategic raw materials, especially rubber, tin, and oil that it needed as a result of the boom in the US economy in the 1920s. Not surprisingly, the growing assertion of American economic hegemony and the concomitant push for greater access to regional markets and investment alarmed the European colonial powers who did all they could to curtail or co-opt the US challenge, nervous as they were that, given the chance, the US would not only gladly control their colonial economies as well but also undermine in the process the structural bases of the traditional colonial system. Spreading American cultural products â what Foster calls the âempire of the mindâ (p. 73) â like Hollywood movies, missionaries, consumer products, and promoting American values like individual liberty and democracy to the region, which the US hoped would allow the peoples in Southeast Asia to achieve modernity and become self-governing, also did not sit well with European colonial officials who worried about their impact on subject peoples.

Despite ostensibly annoying and confounding the regionâs colonial rulers, the US however never followed through on its professed anti-colonial ideology. Not desiring political responsibility for the region, Washington always stopped short of actions that would have required or implied an American âcommitment to uphold a particular political constellationâ in the region (p. 69). Even as it exported American cultural products, the US thus cooperated fully with the European powersâ efforts to ensure that American cultural imports would not endanger the stability of the regional colonial order. When the global Depression in the 1930s threatened the viability of the economic system that undergirded European imperialism in the region, the US had no qualms in abandoning its commitment to open-door economic practices and closing ranks with the European powers to ensure the survival of the system, even at some costs to American interests and indigenous producers. In short, when push comes to shove, as Foster cogently argues, the US âin both official policy and the private acts of its citizens, supported the imperial order in Southeast Asia.â (p. 178.) It did so because it wanted to safeguard the strategic advantages that the Western powers, including the US, enjoyed in Southeast Asia and feared the dangerous threat to stability from encroaching Japanese imperialism and also the knock-on effects of Bolshevik-inspired upheavals on European colonial dependencies in the region. After the abortive PKI [Partai Komunis Indonesia] revolt in the Netherlands East Indies in 1926, Washington discarded its policy of staying aloof and participated in information sharing and cooperation to prevent the spread of communism and communist influences in the region. When heightened but still ineffectual nationalist agitation manifested in the 1930s, especially in Burma and Vietnam, the US once again sided firmly with the efforts of European rulers to uphold the colonial order, albeit hesitantly and with much advice about needed reforms.

What Fosterâs important study also shows is that while US interests in Southeast Asia might have been limited as Tarling alludes, American concerns about communism in Southeast Asia actually predated their later obsession during the Cold War. Drawing on British, French, Dutch and American archival sources, Foster has written a solid and stimulating book that contributes to our understanding of the continuities â and contradictions â in American policy towards Southeast Asia and the regionâs colonial rulers during the interwar years.

The theme of the Cold War and how big power rivalry impinged on indigenous state actors is expertly explored in Matthew Foleyâs *The Cold War and National Assertion in Southeast Asia: Britain, the United States and Burma, 1948-1962*, which is based on his Nottingham University doctoral thesis. Using Burma as his field of study, Foley shows how prevailing Cold War concerns played an influential role in the formulation of British and American

policies towards the former British colony in the period between the latterâs independence from colonial rule in 1948 and the military coup that toppled the civilian government in 1962. Even though Burma turned out to be never more than a âperipheral stateâ in history of the Cold War in Asia, Foley argues that initial Western perception of the governmentâs instability â beset as it was by religious and ethnic revolts and also a serious communist insurgency â and estimation of the countryâs strategic value derived from its long and largely unprotected border with Communist China and its status as one of the worldâs major rice producer, prompted both London and Washington to consider ways and means of propping up the Rangoon regime in order to save Burma from communism and persuade its leaders to stay within the Western orbit. In response to early Burmese requests for help, Britain was the first to use military and financial aid to further these objectives, partly out of a sense of post-colonial duty but also presuming that the provision of aid would give London a measure of influence over Rangoon. Taken aback by the âlossâ of China in October 1949, the US too saw economic and technical assistance as a means to secure Burmese political support for its efforts to contain communist China. But, as Foley argues, both British and American efforts floundered largely because the Burmese refused to become unwitting pawns and passive recipients of foreign aid. Choosing instead to approach the ensuing East-West conflict not in Cold War terms but through the prism of its own national interests, Rangoon astutely manipulated its aid relationships to suit Burmaâs own ends, âeffectively alternating between Western and communist aid as domestic political and economic circumstances dictatedâ (pp. 166-7). So long as the terms were right, Burma was prepared to take assistance from whichever side â be they Chinese, Soviet, British or American. In this way, the Burmese, to the consternation of the Western powers â and doubtless also the Chinese and Soviets â were able to manage their relations with the Cold War powers in a manner that would make them âactive and surprisingly independent authors of their own futuresâ (p. 2).

Built mainly on British and American archival records, Foleyâs well-researched book provides a richly documented study that further debunks the view that the only perspectives that really mattered during the Cold War in Southeast Asia were those of Moscow and Washington. The regionâs leaders often had powerful agendas of their own and, as the case of Burma ostensibly shows, they were able to exploit the latterâs Cold War rivalry to serve national aims. Indeed, if the age of empires saw the advent of great power rivalry and control in Southeast Asia, the arrival of the Cold War ironically provided the region with a way of escape from their imperious sway. By skilfully managing its relations with the big powers, Rangoon, for instance, was able to maintain its policy of neutralism â and ensure that Burma became âone of the forgotten countries of the early Asian Cold Warâ (p. 167).

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