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Natasha Hamilton-Hart. *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions: Southeast Asia and American Power.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012. x + 243 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5054-9.

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Natasha Hamilton-Hart in *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions* advances the argument that there continues to be a strong belief in Southeast Asia that the United States is a benign hegemon. Among foreign policymakers in the six countries detailed in her study (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam), not only is this belief persistent but these polities also "are basically comfortable with U.S. influence and presence" (p. 7). Does this beg the question whether the hegemony of the United States in Southeast Asia may be in decline as current affairs in the Middle East might suggest? Hamilton-Hart explains why this is not likely in Southeast Asia even though it may be happening in other areas. She advances the view that although there may be an existing erosion of unipolarity and some signs of a return to soft balancing and "bandwagonin" by smaller states against the United States, these positions are slow to materialize. "The United States is not perceived as a potential threat because it is not a threat" (p. 9). Nations do not fear their loss of sovereignty because of U.S. power even though the United States has been involved in many violent episodes in Southeast Asia while developing its positions to contain communism. The book contains six chapters; a well-documented appendix containing interview data of the seventy-four interviews conducted during her research principally for chapter 4, "History Lessons," and chapter 5, "Professional Expertise"; and a voluminous bibliography.

By examining the interests of the governing or ruling power elites in each country, Hamilton-Hart develops her argument of relatively "benign hegemony." These hard interests drive associations or alignments toward the United States. "The origins of alignment lie in the outcome of domestic political struggles … and the sectional interests of contenders for power who seized the opportunities presented by American anticommunism" (p. 10). Hamilton-Hart points out that strong belief about the United States and other contenders for hegemonic status, in ways that deviate from common assumptions, are not necessarily inaccurate. She considers these beliefs "illusions." Some "externally verifiable standard" is required to determine whether such beliefs are accurate or inaccurate. She notes that illusions "are shaped, first, by the direct political, economic, and career interests of power holders, foreign policy practitioners, and those in the wider foreign policy community" (p. 11).

Two chapters of the book explore the formation of beliefs about the United States as a benign power. Chapter 4 retells the national histories of each of the six countries, especially focusing on the role and nature of anticommunist policies and local domestic struggles. Chapter 5 describes the beliefs held among the foreign policy community. Explored within this chapter is the "defeat and silencing of the political left (or right, in the case of Vietnam) since the 1960s or earlier" (p. 143). Hamilton-Hart examines the beliefs and attitudes of different groups with different memories, agendas, and conceptions of interest to determine if changes in the alignment of power groups, as a result of domestic struggles, alter the attitude toward the United States and beliefs about the role it plays as a hegemon in the region. She concludes that those exposed to different national histories form different judgments about the United States. Power holders have shaped the national histories "while their opponents have either been written out of history or demonized as treasonous" (p. 14).

Hamilton-Hart uncovers a telling point in her research. She writes that "the prevailing professional wisdom was that irritation with the United States or moral qualms about its policies should not impede bilateral relations…. Underpinning this orientation are the foundational beliefs that American power is fundamentally benign and that an American presence in the region is necessary for stability and prosperity" (p. 146). Hamilton-Hart makes this statement when comparing China as an alternative hegemonic power. So, why is the United States considered beneficial to the region?-

The answer should not be surprising; a former Nazi propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, outlined it seventy years ago. A Malaysian former official paraphrased the answer to Hamilton-Hart that if you repeat something often enough it is believed (p. 159).

It is not likely that this position of benign hegemon will prevail in Southeast Asia. A decline is currently occurring in the U.S. worldwide position as the unilateral superpower. This waning position is encouraged by American policies of the "war on terror" and by the current U.S. economic circumstances. Will the United States continue to have the economic capacity to serve its regime interests?

The book does not address the question of which fundamental beliefs about the United States are correct. That depends on where one stands. For example, Hamilton-Hart writes: "America's wars in Indochina which claimed around a million deaths and an even larger toll in terms of other casualties and environmental damage in Vietnam alone are recalled in parts of the foreign policy community of other Southeast Asian countries as an instance of American sacrifice that 'held the tide' and 'bought time' for the region. Past Chinese 'meddling' in Southeast Asia is more frequently recalled than interference by the United States" (p. 192).

The book adds significantly to the knowledge and research of students of international relations and area studies of Southeast Asia. It is scholarly in presentation and well organized as it moves the reader through the development of its thesis. The principal weakness of the work is that its area of interest is too narrow. There is considerable geophysical overlap with other nations surrounding the region of the six targeted countries and they are noticeably missing–Japan, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Island nations, among others. Concentrating on the six is fine but they contain a historical symmetry and relevance of belief systems. Other leftist leaning countries, like Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, with other experiences, would be welcome additions to the synthesis and analysis.

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