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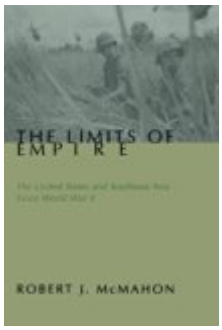

Robert J. McMahon. *The Limits of Empire. The United States and Southeast Asia Since World War II.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. xii + 276 pp. $18.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-10881-2.

Reviewed by Marc Frey

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The history of American-Southeast Asian relations after World War Two has for obvious reasons attracted a great deal of interest. It is therefore all the more surprising that a comprehensive and up-to-date overview on this important topic has been lacking.[1] Robert McMahon, professor of history at the University of Florida and a well-known specialist on US foreign relations towards South and Southeast Asia, has undertaken the formidable task of analyzing the complexities of America's involvement in and commitment to the region as a whole. The outcome is a brilliant, well-organized interpretative history that will serve both as a starting point as well as a reference work for many years to come. Based on a multitude of English-language publications and on a variety of published primary sources, McMahon has also combed the National Archives and the Presidential Libraries to shed light on little-known developments.

As the author makes clear, American interest in Southeast Asia was a product of World War Two. But the war not only transformed the role and position of the United States in the Pacific, it also transformed the political arrangements in the region. Strong nationalist movements in Burma, Indonesia, and Vietnam demanded independence and sovereignty, while the colonial powers tried to reestablish their control. Torn between "America's historic identification with the principles of self- determination" (p. 26) and support for the Western powers, the Truman administration initially tried to solve the "dilemma" by adopting a "policy of nonintervention and neutrality toward the colonial upheavals" (p.27). In accordance with the nation's own history of decolonization and in view of the American experience with the Philippines, Washington hoped that the European colonial powers would guide their dependencies, in collaboration with local elites, towards self-government. Continued close cooperation between "center" and "periphery" would help to realize Americas vision for the postwar world: the reconstruction of Europe and Japan, and the integration of the Southeast Asian economies into a capitalist system based on the free flow of capital, ideas, and trade.

However, this evolutionary and gradualist approach towards decolonization was satisfactory neither to the colonial powers nor to the nationalist movements. In the case of Indonesia, the US eventually supported the cause of nationalism, primarily because the Netherlands did not have the means to disrupt American efforts to create an "empire by invitation" in Europe. [2] France was a different case - as were the Vietnamese nationalists. The administration's "quasi neutral approach" (p.36) towards Indochina was abandoned between mid-1949 and early 1950, a time perceived by policymakers as "the gravest global crisis of the entire post-war period" (p.37). Southeast Asia came to be regarded as vital for American national security, and the containment of communism and the "search for stability" became the twin pillars on which American policy towards the region would rest. As McMahon points out, geostrategic, economic, political, and psychological considerations proved mutually reinforcing. Thus, the increasing involvement in and commitment to Southeast Asia from 1950 on was primarily "a function of threat perception" (p.45).

McMahon characterizes the second half of the 1950s as a time when the "limits of American power in that corner of the globe" (p.69) became all too apparent. These limits, and the accompanying frustrations, however, were apparent and real from the start: Indonesia and Burma pursued a policy of what would soon come to be known as "non-alignment", Thailand became an ally because of its own national interests, Indochina remained a "quagmire", all countries resorted to varying degrees of economic nationalism, and only in the Philippines were Americans really able to influence political and economic developments. Thus, well before Dien Bien Phu sent shockwaves around the globe did an "overall sense of impending regional crisis" (p.103) pervade U.S. policy circles. But this is not to diminish the importance of the French defeat. It truly propelled the Eisenhower administration into action: the creation of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), military assistance to Indonesian federalists, the meddlings in Laos, and the unqualified support for the South Vietnamese regime under Ngo Dinh Diem. The deepening and multi-layered US involvement reflected Washington's repeated efforts to "recast the face of Southeast Asia in an American image" (p.104).

The fifth chapter, entitled "At War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1968", cogently summarizes the American war in Vietnam. The particular strength of this chapter lies in the regionalist approach to the war. While the American commitment to South Vietnam deepened, developments in Indonesia further eroded the "domino theory". McMahon convincingly demonstrates that the Johnson administration as well as the CIA were completely taken by surprise by the coup of the Indonesian army against America's long-time foe, Sukarno. And he also shows that with regard to Thailand and the Philippines the "U.S. escalation in Vietnam reversed the traditional relationship between patron and client" (p. 124). Thailand in particular became an "indispensible ally" (p.127) during the war. Ironically - and "unintended" (p. 142) - the war greatly stimulated economic development in the region and contributed to closer trade and financial relations between Japan and Southeast Asia. But as McMahon points out, Southeast Asians held ambivalent notions about Americas involvement in Vietnam. While the political elites in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines seldom openly criticized Washington's policies, leaders reaffirmed their interest in solving "Asian problems" in an "Asian way" by "Asian people" (Suharto, quoted on p. 142).

One such effort was the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. While McMahon rightly argues that in the long run, ASEAN would prove "far more dynamic and durable" (p. 144) than at the time imagined, he evades the question whether the creation of ASEAN was the outcome of regional interests or of

external policies. If the former is more plausible (and that would be my interpretation), ASEAN would probably constitute yet another example for McMahon's thesis that Americas empire building in Southeast Asia had its limits -- following the settling of post-colonial conflicts, most notably the ***konfrontasi*** between Indonesia and Malaysia, political elites all over Southeast Asia became much more critical of outside intervention and more self-conscious about their abilities to shape developments.

The American response to the Tet-Offensive of spring 1968 constitutes indeed, as McMahon argues, a kind of watershed in the history of U.S.-Southeast Asian relations. From that point on, two presidents tried to disengage the United States from Vietnam. As the Nixon administration escalated the war, isolated North Vietnam by pursuing "linkage" and "ping-pong diplomacy", and as the war finally came to an end, the ASEAN countries became increasingly worried about American intentions in the region. They were certainly apprehensive about defense and military matters. But the ruling elites in Southeast Asia were probably equally alarmed about power: as McMahon makes clear, U.S. military assistance had helped to keep elites, armies and individual leaders in power regardless of their position on human rights, individual freedom, and democratization.

The end of the war in Indochina marked a change of paradigms: until the late 1960s, American policymakers had considered Southeast Asia as a region of "vital national security import" (p. 184). Since the early 1970s, economic considerations came to inform American perceptions of the region. Trade and investment replaced geopolitics as the principal basis of U.S. interest. ASEAN was taken more seriously, and regional cooperation was encouraged by all administrations from Nixon to Clinton. Although occasional crises over human rights issues (specifically under the Carter administration) or trade affected U.S.-Southeast Asian diplomatic relations, the ASEAN countries continued to favor a visible American presence in the region as counterweights to the growing power and influence of China. However, the debate about "Asian values", undue outside interference by Western investors and the International Monetary Fund makes clear that the Southeast Asian nations, while interested in deepening their relations with the United States, demand being treated as sovereign partners and equals. McMahon argues that this new Southeast Asian assertiveness is likely to complicate relations with the United States. It is the "clash of cultures"-thesis which increasingly worries elites all over Southeast Asia. I would argue that it is primarily the responsibility of American policymakers to engage in a meaningful dialogue about the transformation of societies and about the plurality of values. Only then can we speak of true partnership and equality.

Robert McMahon has written a highly readable account of the complex history of U.S.-Southeast Asian relations from 1945 to the present. The emphasis is on the diplomatic, political, and security relations, and sometimes one would have wished for more information on development aid, cultural politics and cultural transfer, or U.S. contributions to the transformation of Southeast Asian societies (e.g. the "Green Revolution"). Given the fact that these aspects have barely been studied yet, McMahon implicitly offers his suggestions for further research to a new generation of historians. But there is no doubt that everyone of us engaged in this field will use ***The Limits of Empire*** as the standard reference work. An appendix lists useful figures on trade, investment, and economic and military assistance, and the very well-documented notes and the bibliographic essay facilitate further research. All in all, this book is essential reading for everyone interested in Southeast Asia, in the Vietnam War, and in the contemporary history of U.S.-Southeast Asian relations.

Notes

[1]. For an earlier assessment of US foreign policy towards the region, see Russell H. Fifield,

Americans in Southeast Asia: The Roots of Commitment (New York: Crowell, 1973).

[2]. Geir Lundestad, *The American "Empire" and Other Studies of US Foreign Policy in a Contemporary Perspective* (London: Oxford University Press, 1990), 54.

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