

BOOK REVIEWS

***Hard Interests, Soft Illusions: Southeast Asia and American Power.* By Natasha Hamilton-Hart. Ithaca, New York and London: Cornell University Press, 2012. Hardcover: 243pp.**

Much ink has been spilled in recent months regarding the American “pivot” to Asia. While there have been debates about whether the policy is anything new and whether the assurances made by a declining power are credible, this re-engagement has been broadly welcomed by regional elites. The US presence is routinely described as “positive” and “stabilizing”, and Washington is widely seen as a relatively “benign” hegemon.

Why is the United States viewed in such a positive light? In *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions*, Natasha Hamilton-Hart tackles a question that is rarely asked, exploring the interests and beliefs that underpin Southeast Asia’s alignment with Washington. She rejects the argument that state action is driven largely by systemic pressures such as the distribution of power or balance of threats. Rather, echoing the work of Subaltern Realists, Hamilton-Hart claims that, in Southeast Asia, there are good reasons to think “the motives that drive this alignment are located at the domestic level” (p. 20).

At the heart of the book are the “hard interests” of power holders and the “soft illusions” or beliefs of foreign policy-makers and practitioners. Beliefs about the positive role of the United States are not illusory, but neither can they be easily equated with “national interests”. As has been well documented, in many parts of the region the gap between elite views of Washington and popular opinion is striking.

The book starts with a discussion of the material interests of those who gained power as a consequence of US actions in Southeast Asia since World War Two. In a section entitled “The political economy of alignment”, Hamilton-Hart argues, “the winners who emerged from political struggles between the 1940s and the 1960s enjoyed American support because they pursued policies that were broadly in line with American preferences for capitalist development in the region” (p. 85). The author claims that the exercise of American power in Southeast Asia served two ends for regional elites: first, it helped them defeat potential rivals and opponents; second, it allowed them to “pay off supporters and in some cases to appropriate material gains individually” (p. 18).

But if the argument is grounded in political economy, the bigger claim is about the independent power of beliefs. The author argues that there is a particular alignment of material interest and ideological vision that has underpinned acceptance of American hegemony and is the condition for continued support for US “engagement” and “balancing” in the region today. The ideational basis of alignment is explored in two chapters that draw on a rich survey of the historical literature and seventy-four interviews with Southeast Asian policy-makers and practitioners. For America’s friends and partners in the region, the most common justification for viewing it as a “benign, stabilizing force” is its historical record (p. 88). Chapter Four examines the way that national histories have been written and interpreted to draw particular (largely positive) lessons about the United States and its role in the region. Three themes emerge: first, in non-Communist states, the spectre of Communism in past domestic conflicts is frequently invoked; second, external threats are described in a way that presents the United States as a protector; and finally “scant attention” is paid to the human casualties of past conflicts (p. 89). Country by country, the book examines the place of America in national narratives, from Singapore, where the Vietnam War is widely remembered (by an older generation in particular) as “buying time” for non-Communist Southeast Asia, to Vietnam, where rather than yielding the lesson the US is an “aggressive power” Hamilton-Hart argues the country’s historical experience is more “often invoked as teaching a lesson about China as an expansionist power” (p. 131). In non-Communist Southeast Asia these national histories are also frequently “sanitized”, with the human costs of past American actions — the wars in Vietnam

and Cambodia, support for anti-Communist purges — largely expunged.

The book then moves on to explore the foreign policy community more closely, in particular scrutinizing the way depoliticized “professional expertise” functions to favour certain beliefs on the part of elites. Here, much is made of the “epistemic environment”, the sources of information about Washington and how “acceptable” forms of reasoning are defined. Interviews unsurprisingly find that foreign policy professionals have regular exposure to American news sources and relatively greater access to positive information about the United States. Personal ties and public diplomacy are revealed to be effective instruments of socialization. Discrepant information is often set aside. The regional conference circuit is indicted for failing to question “taken for granted” assumptions about the stabilizing role of the United States.

Hard Interests is theoretically innovative and genuinely interdisciplinary. The approach taken in the case studies “owes more to historiography and anthropology than political science” (p. 196). While the territory covered is broad and diverse, the analysis is careful and reflective. Hamilton-Hart acknowledges the challenges in testing the arguments she makes (p. 193). Archival material might help confirm what policy-makers “really” think, but getting access to this material in Southeast Asia is next to impossible. It is less clear why American policy-makers were not interviewed, if only to contrast their justifications with those offered by their Southeast Asian counterparts.

The primary goal of the book is to explain past alignments; what this means for the future receives less attention. The “political economy of alignment” argument should mean Washington’s image as a “benign hegemon is likely to fade” (p. 191) in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis and China’s emergence as a key market and source of investment for Southeast Asian countries. This does not seem to be the case, at least not yet. For all its Confucius Institutes and “smile diplomacy” Beijing has been less successful in creating its own “soft illusions”, winning hearts and minds and in creating an epistemic environment that would favour a new regional balance.

Hard Interests is a provocative and refreshing read, asking a big, important question that is curiously absent from the regional security literature. “Trespassing” self-consciously as it does across history, anthropology, social psychology, security studies and

political economy, there will doubtless be those who challenge some of its findings, but if it succeeds in generating a real debate about the role of the United States in Southeast Asia, it will have made a major contribution to our understanding of the region's security order.

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