

***The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation.* By Ang Cheng Guan.
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Ang Cheng Guan's latest book is a well-crafted analysis of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), a military alliance that is often overlooked in the history of the Cold War in Asia. Based on an extensive literature review, and utilizing a wealth of sources, mainly from America's diplomatic archives, the author has succeeded in producing a solid tract of diplomatic history. The book not only re-evaluates SEATO as an important case study of collective defence, but also provides readers with a deep understanding of the history of the Cold War in Asia from the 1950s to the 1970s. *The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation* is thus an important contribution to the literature on the history of international relations in Asia.

In Chapter One, the author discusses several security frameworks that existed in Asia before SEATO was established in 1954, while in the subsequent chapters he charts the history of SEATO from its inception to its dissolution in 1977. The SEATO that emerges is described by the author as "very much a compromised treaty" (p. 34). Indeed, SEATO's founding text, the Manila Pact, showed concern for regional security because many countries in Southeast Asia were in the process of nation-building, but lacked substantive content other than an anti-communist orientation. After the creation of SEATO, there were attempts to substantiate the contents of the Manila Pact. However, what became apparent during this process was Washington's unwillingness to get involved militarily in Asia or be bound by regional security commitments. This, in turn, led the Asian signatories of the pact to become increasingly distrustful of America. While Secretary of State John Foster Dulles recognized the necessity of building SEATO to confront the Communist bloc in Asia, he did not intend to make it comparable to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). There were also differences of opinion among the United Kingdom, France and the United States about the approach and commitment to Southeast Asia. Article III of the pact also provided for economic cooperation, and SEATO launched several frameworks for this purpose, though none of them were ever successful. Meanwhile, during SEATO's early years, Australia and New Zealand took the position that SEATO should not affect the role of the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) alliance. Pakistan had joined with great enthusiasm, even though it lost its

interest in SEATO relatively quickly since the United States was not able to “allay Pakistan’s fear from the threat from India” (p. 99).

SEATO’s touchstone, and the incident that led to its eventual demise, was the political crisis in Lao in 1959–62, when the attempt to create national reconciliation between the US-backed Royal Laotian Government and the left-leaning Pathet Lao faltered. The author focuses on Laos in Chapter Four, which is the most powerful chapter in the book because it explains the complicated motivations of the key actors. Bangkok’s disillusionment with SEATO was very clear during this period since SEATO failed to alleviate the deteriorating security situation in the Thailand’s neighbourhood. There was a serious misalignment between the United States, Britain and France over the Laotian issue. The change in US leadership from President Dwight Eisenhower to President John F. Kennedy was also a factor in America’s decreasing commitment. Even as the Vietnam War escalated, such structural factors did not change; SEATO survived only because its members were reluctant to dismantle the organization without a new regional security framework to replace it. The dissolution of SEATO in the mid-1970s was thus a natural consequence of SEATO losing its *raison d’être* in the wake of America’s rapprochement with the People’s Republic of China. Interestingly, as the author notes, China was more concerned about, and appreciative of, SEATO than the organization itself (p. 123).

In analysing SEATO’s fate and reconstructing international relations in Asia between the 1950s and 1970s (when the Cold War was at its height there), the book brings to light the various views and perceptions of Asian countries regarding the involvement of Western nations in the region’s security environment. Ultimately, Ang suggests that regional multilateral frameworks initiated by extra-regional powers—even if necessary for security reasons—may not necessarily have the support of regional countries because those powers lack a deep understanding of the complexity of interests and political sensitivity towards pressure from outside.

In Asia, where US-led bilateral alliances are the mainstay of security, SEATO’s multilateralism was meant to provide a complementary coordinating mechanism and meeting place for anti-communist countries. However, the extent to which SEATO had a substantive role and function remains open to question. From the US perspective, SEATO may have been sufficient in a symbolic sense, but it cannot be said that the benefits were commensurate with the political and diplomatic costs since Washington had to

keep showing its commitment to SEATO in various forms. It is also questionable whether, in joining SEATO, the smaller Asian members succeeded in eliciting a strong commitment from the major powers to satisfy their own interests and securing better relations with them. Moreover, the difficulty of collective decision-making was one of the reasons why SEATO did not work. Here, it is important to note that Europe's understanding of multilateralism differed from that of Asian countries, which primarily sought to build robust bilateral relations with the United States.

At the outset of the book, Ang states that he would like to examine the significance of SEATO for future multilateral cooperation in Asia, where great power competition has once again intensified. Although this book does not state so explicitly, the fact that the United States, as the leading architect of SEATO, lacked a deep understanding of the international relations of Asia to properly select participating countries, set agendas and manage signatories' expectations may have contributed to SEATO's failure. Once again, Washington is now seeking to create a US-led security architecture in Asia to counter China's influence. However, it remains to be seen if policymakers in Washington will learn from SEATO's mistakes.

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