

***Southeast Asia Views the United States: Perceptions, Policies, and Prospects.* Edited by Ann Marie Murphy. New York City, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2025. Softcover: 336pp.**

Nearly 15 years after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a “pivot to Asia” for “America’s Pacific century”, Washington remains preoccupied with conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, which continue to command policymakers’ limited time and resources. There has been no discernible progress in shifting resources and personnel to the Pacific. In particular, Southeast Asia remains an empirical blind spot within both the American policymaking community and academic circles.

This edited volume seeks to address this blind spot and the bias in the existing literature on the region, which privileges US strategic interests (p. 2). Indeed, it stands out from recent books on Southeast Asia, which overemphasize US-China competition and downplay the diversity and interests of Southeast Asian states.

The book includes chapters on Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. It is unfortunate that, like several other recent offerings, it omits Brunei, Laos and Timor-Leste. This trend only reinforces a fragmented view of Southeast Asia. Admittedly, however, the region’s size and diversity pose challenges for scholars trying to present authoritative accounts, and Ann Marie Murphy assembled an excellent group of contributors for this volume, making each chapter worth careful reading.

The book’s historically grounded case studies have much to offer scholars of Southeast Asia today. Pongphisoot Busbarat and Wannapa Leerasiri explain how “U.S. actions in the aftermath of World War II reinforced Thai perceptions of America as a [great friend]”, particularly its development assistance (p. 83). Common threat perceptions regarding the spread of communism also helped cement Thai-US relations. But increasingly divergent threat perceptions have weakened the alliance and prompted Bangkok to now seek other partners (p. 113). By contrast, Renato Cruz de Castro argues that converging threat perceptions between the United States and the Philippines suggest that the two sides will continue to strengthen their alliance moving forward (p. 129).

See Seng Tan illustrates how Singapore has encouraged and facilitated the continued US commitment to the region, even as it seeks a condominium of power-sharing between the United

States and China, its two principal partners (p. 165). However, he warns, Singapore's support for the United States "does not mean a commitment to take Washington's side on every international issue... especially where Singapore's interests and the general well-being of the Asian region are thought to be at risk" (p. 164).

Moving to Indonesia, Evan Laksmana warns that efforts to court Jakarta overlook "the deeper foundations of Indonesia's foreign policy, including a commitment to nonalignment and a belief that no great power is inherently better than the other" (p. 225). As Cheng-Chwee Kuik, Yew Meng Lai and Fikry Rahman point out, "successive Malaysian leaders...have viewed the United States as a vital security and economic partner but, at times, also an annoyance and even a problem" (p. 265).

One of the volume's unavoidable weaknesses stems from the timing of its publication: just before the 2024 US elections. This limits the authors' predictive abilities. In her concluding chapter, Murphy surmises that the re-election of President Donald Trump "and a return to his unilateral America First policy would likely have deleterious effects on U.S. relations with Southeast Asia" (p. 372). Murphy's reasoning mostly rests on her assumption that the second Trump administration would resemble the first, with "an explicitly anti-China policy" (p. 372). However, since returning to office, Trump has largely jettisoned great power rivalry with China and adopted a more conciliatory approach aimed at securing favourable terms in a US-China trade deal.

While welcome in Southeast Asia, the relative stability in US-China relations has prompted many policymakers to question Washington's long-term commitment to the region's security. As Murphy explains in Chapter Two, Washington's focus on Southeast Asia has historically oscillated as great power competition waxes and wanes: "When great power competition is high, Southeast Asia rises on the U.S. policy agenda...Conversely, once great power competition declined following the end of the Cold War, so, too, did the importance of Southeast Asia to Washington" (p. 71).

Huong Le Thu argues that strategic convergence between Washington and Hanoi has made Vietnam one of "the strongest supporters of the United States in Southeast Asia", despite divergences in domestic politics (p. 191). However, Trump's re-election has upended that balance, leading to greater strategic divergence even as domestic politics pose less of an issue given the Trump administration's disregard for longstanding US values of human rights and democracy. In a similar vein, Thearith Leng and Vannarith

Chheang argue that “Cambodia and the United States should try to find common ground to expand and deepen cooperation, looking beyond the optics of human rights and democracy” (p. 282). The authors would likely approve of recent developments since the book’s publication, including the restoration of bilateral military exercises between the United States and Cambodia.

In her chapter on Myanmar, Moe Thuzar underscores the pragmatism at the heart of Myanmar’s foreign policy throughout its post-independence history. While US interests are directly opposed to military rule, Thuzar’s historical analysis suggests the possibility for pragmatic re-engagement in the not-so-distant future (p. 329).

Trump’s return to the White House in 2025 has upended US foreign policy, abandoning the Biden administration’s emphasis on ideological competition with China and focusing more on economic security and trade. These dramatic shifts pose both challenges and opportunities for Southeast Asia. This book will serve as an essential reference for scholars and policymakers seeking to adapt to these new realities.

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