

***America's Strategy in Southeast Asia: From the Cold War to the Terror War.* By James A. Tyner. Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007. Softcover: 240pp.**

Studies of US foreign policy towards any world region, including Southeast Asia, are usually written by political scientists or historians who focus on decision-making conflicts among bureaucracies, the reciprocal impacts of domestic and international politics, and the effects of the personalities and decision-making styles of key decision-makers. Seldom do other social scientists venture into this arena. It was, therefore, with considerable anticipation that I read James Tyner's *America's Strategy in Southeast Asia*. Because Professor Tyner is a geographer I expected an assessment of Southeast Asia's spatial and resource characteristics on Washington's foreign policy debates: the differences between insular and mainland Southeast Asia, or an explanation of how and why the US Navy has dominated American strategic policy in Southeast Asia rather than ground and air forces whose roles are more prominent in Northeast Asia. Although some passing attention is paid to these issues, the thrust of the book's argument is quite different.

*America's Strategy in Southeast Asia* is a scholarly polemic, for the most part well researched and written. It is a condemnation of Western imperialism and neo-colonialism (Professor Tyner's description) in general and American depredations in particular from the nineteenth century to the present day. The book belongs in the new left tradition of the 1960s and 1970s and world systems analysis of the 1980s. Its intellectual forebearers are Noam Chomsky, Gabriel Kolko, Walden Bello and Howard Zinn. It is noteworthy that the author's extensive bibliography does not include such prominent scholars on the international politics of Southeast Asia and American policy in the region as Amitav Acharya, Muthiah Alagappa, Tim Huxley, Michael Leifer, William Tow, and Carl Thayer. (Perhaps their assessments do not conform to the author's ideology.)

Briefly, Tyner's underlying argument is that all world regions are social constructs, and these constructs are determined by the most powerful actors — since World War II the United States. More specifically, “the construction of Southeast Asia ... has been a crucial component in the creation of the American empire” (p. 1). (Somehow, I doubt whether the Southeast Asian states which have been organizing their own political, economic and security affairs over the past forty years would recognize this description.) From this

beginning, Professor Tyner inserts the concept of metageographies, by which he means the political struggle among dominant states to control what a region means and who will control it (p. 19). The dominating American discourse from the nineteenth century to the present day is based on the Leninist notion of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism. That is, because capitalist countries overproduce they must export capital to remain prosperous. US foreign policy, therefore, for the past century has been the handmaiden of capitalist interests manifested through efforts to control Southeast Asia for trade, investment and access to resources (p.137). The major point here is not that countries promote international commercial intercourse for their own benefit — after all, that's a primary goal of all foreign policies — but that the dominant country, that is, the United States, engages in these actions as a zero-sum enterprise, extracting Southeast Asian resources, driving the region's populations into penury, insuring that no local industrial competition can flourish, and condemning these countries to an endless cycle of political and economic subordination.

Professor Tyner's Southeast Asia does not square with the region most contemporary analysts study — one that has witnessed over the past twenty five years the rise of educated, entrepreneurial middle classes in several ASEAN states, a significant reduction of the proportion of many of these countries' populations living in poverty, and economic diversification in some, leading to a reduction in dependence on natural resource exploitation for economic livelihood. Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and most recently Vietnam, are all on an upward economic trajectory. While this optimistic projection so far is less characteristic of Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, their lagging performance is not a function of Western imperial control but their own political failings.

To be fair, if the reader puts the author's ideological baggage aside, he provides some fine historical analysis of the relations between the West and Southeast Asia; and his chapter on the rise of the US neo-conservatives is spot on. For those who continue to fight the battles of the old "new left", this book may serve as a battle cry; for the rest of us, it seems obsolete.

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