

# H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 303

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Wen-Qing Ngoei. *Arc of Containment: Britain, United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia*.

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9781501716409 (hardcover, \$45.00).

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On 11 April 1963, *The Indonesian Herald*, a semi-official English newspaper endorsed by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, published an editorial essay titled “How to Alienate Friends.” This essay condemned the “mental attitude of Americans” that allowed them to easily accuse other countries as Communists. “If America begins to think that she alone possesses the monopoly of wisdom,” the editor noted, “then soon she will be creating in her own image that the rest of the world had gone Communist.”<sup>1</sup> The critical (if not antagonistic) position of Indonesia against the United States was not the only tension in that particular year. It came together with the early confrontation with Malaysia. The newly assigned British ambassador in Jakarta even got a public warning from the media one day after giving his official credential to President Sukarno. It was a period of tension when the domino seemed potentially to be about to fall, a period when the anti-Communist arc started to get stronger.

Wen-Qing Ngoei’s *Arc of Containment* advances this familiar story through an examination of the relations of the United States and Britain in Cold War Southeast Asia. By focusing on Malaya and Singapore, Ngoei aims to unravel the multiple layers and complexity of U.S. and British geostrategies in Southeast Asia beyond the case of Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> Rather than seeing foreign relations as a bilateral relationship, Ngoei employs a multilateral approach in revealing the intricate relationship and “significant continuities” between the British and U.S. empires (9). In this narrative, empires did not operate alone. In between were Southeast Asian anti-Communist leaders and their decolonization projects that “intersected with pre-existing local antipathy toward China and its diaspora” (5). Ngoei argues that this form of nationalism ushered the region from a period of European-dominated colonialism to one of U.S. hegemony.

In five chapters, Ngoei chronologically and elegantly narrates the story by firstly tracing how the domino principle came into place. In this first chapter, Ngoei traces the period of Japanese Occupation in Southeast Asia as a “window to the longer history of Anglo-American perceptions of Southeast Asia’s interconnectedness” (11), and discusses how the subsequent Japanese invasion in the region created an image of domino for the Allies spectacles. The experience of Euro-American experience in the region during the Pacific War created what Ngoei calls the “Atlantic echo chamber” that shared the same conviction on how to deal with Southeast Asia as a region. Adding to this was the long-standing racist views about the Chinese diaspora in the region. Like British colonial authorities, who were long confronted with the growing population of Chinese in Malaya and Singapore, the U.S. also shared similar anxiety with Chinese immigrants since the nineteenth

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial, “How to Alienate Friends,” *The Indonesian Herald*, Vol. II, No. 113 (11 April 1963), 2.

<sup>2</sup> In his Introduction, Ngoei addresses the gap of literature in the history of U.S.-Southeast Asia relations. Studies on Vietnam is the most voluminous compared to other Southeast Asian countries (p. 188, n12).

century. The later strategy to weaken Malaya Communist Party (MCP), most of whose members were ethnic Chinese bore the racial baggage of Anglo-American experience.

The next two chapters delve deeper into the influence of the British experience in Malaya in shaping the U.S. strategy during the Cold War. Chapter Two offers a paradoxical story of how Britain supported the anti-Communist, anti-Chinese nationalism as part of its strategy to preserve its imperial influence. By choosing Malayan collaborators, Britain and Malaya's anti-Communist leaders cast a political alliance against MCP and its political campaign. Supporting the Malayan nationalist project became part of the British counterinsurgency strategy. The United States, fascinated by British experience in Malaya, took some lessons from it. In Chapter Three, Ngoei examines how U.S. officials manifested a fantasy of tackling Communism like "swatting mosquitoes" (85) based on their (mis)understandings of British counterinsurgency. Indeed, British policy became practical knowledge that informed U.S. officials, but for Ngoei, the more crucial point is the endurance of Britain's influence in the region that paved the way for U.S. empire-building in the region.

Ngoei next articulates the solidification of the 'arc of containment.' It began with the creation of Malaysia in 1963 and the later alliance between Malaysia under Tunku Abdul Rahman and Thailand and the Philippines. Singapore smoothed the process by means of the repression of its socialist movement, and the annihilation of the Indonesian Communist Party, followed by the fall of Sukarno in 1965, completed this formation. The final chapter provides the final form of this arc: the network alliance between the "friendly kings" of Southeast Asia" (143) with the United States. The establishment of military cooperation and regional organization marked the resolution of the anti-Communist campaign in the region. In this chapter, Ngoei also provides an umbrella narrative that eloquently shows the transition from European colonialism to U.S. hegemony in the region. The U.S. might not have remained in Vietnam, but its influence and dominance lingered.

A familiar story, when told differently, gives a fresh perspective. Ngoei's approach to U.S. foreign relations in and with Southeast Asia as a region offers a compelling narrative that reveals the entanglement between imperial policy, race, and decolonization. The so-called Chinese question, which had long been raised by European colonial authorities, continued to appear as fuel for mobilizing and securing political alliances during the Cold War. Ngoei eloquently shows the racial anxiety embedded in the post-war foreign policies of the United States and how the paradox of anti-Communist nationalism paved the way for such a policy to be exerted and manifested.

According to Ngoei, the anti-Communist arc required a gradual, slow-but-sure construction. The arc was not necessarily a smooth line encircling the geographical position of Southeast Asia, which then connected to East Asia (South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan). By zooming-in to the groundworks of policy, the arc looks more like a patchy line weaved by pragmatism and strategic decisions. The postcolonial Southeast Asian states were struggling for independence and international recognition, yet at the same time they also faced social and economic segregation left by colonialism. These struggles turned into an opportunity for the British and the U.S. to leverage their ascendancy by preserving and deepening the colonial structure. Ngoei sensibly presents this issue as the core of his argument. Decolonization projects of Southeast Asian states were not without contradictions and the alienation of some groups of people—and the marriage of political position and ethnicity (for example, Communist Chinese) also was not a stable unit of relationship. The conflict between the MCP and the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) tells a familiar story about the difficulties of nation-building. Nevertheless, by exposing how British and U.S. policymakers utilized this conflict and how Southeast Asian leaders also used the British and U.S. interest to gain support, Ngoei highlights the significance of decolonization and nationalist projects as a condition that was necessary for empires in bolstering their positions.

The book, however, leaves unanswered some questions about the continuity of the U.S. presence in the region. How did U.S. experience with the Philippines and its brief involvement with the British and the Dutch through Marshall Plan loans during the Revolutionary War in Indonesia (1945-1949) shape its attitude about the region during the Cold War? Ngoei mentions both subjects briefly when discussing the content of the U.S. army's *Handbook for the Suppression of Communist Guerrilla/Terrorist Operation* (94-96), but does not clarify how the long engagement of the United States with the region influenced its post-war foreign policy. Would the story of transition be different if the book considered the continued participation of the United States in the region alongside that of the Europeans?

Aside from these questions, *Arc of Containment* is an insightful book. Ngoei's book advances the history of U.S.-Southeast Asia relations by successfully provides a fresh and strong outlook on the entanglement of British and U.S. empire with decolonization projects. It also echoes the current growing literature on international and diplomatic history of Southeast Asia during the Cold War that seeks into the ambivalent alliances and rivalries between nation-states.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See among others Taomo Zhou, *Migration in the Time of Revolution: China, Indonesia, and the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019); Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018); Eva Hansson, Kevin Hewison, Jim Glassman (eds.) "Special Issue: Legacies of the Cold War in East and Southeast Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 50:4 (2020): 493-678.