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Wen-Qing Ngoei. *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019.

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 8, No. 3, December 2019, pp. 456-458.

How to Cite: Espena, Darlene Machell de Leon. Review of *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* by Wen-Qing Ngoei. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, December 2019, pp. 456-458.

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Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia

WEN-QING NGOEI

Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019.

Wen-Qing Ngoei's *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* is a thought-provoking, compelling, and significant contribution to the study of American hegemony and intervention in postwar Southeast Asia. Ngoei challenges historians and scholars of U.S.–Southeast Asia relations to shift their vantage point from Vietnam to British Malaya and Singapore, and in doing so, employ a new approach in understanding the complexities and nuances of United States' foray into Southeast Asian affairs. Ngoei advances a “new international history” of the region that unravels the intimate and intertwined narratives of the British, Americans, and Southeast Asian anticommunist leaders during a tumultuous period in the region when Southeast Asian decolonization coalesced with global Cold War forces.

Although historians have examined this period in Southeast Asian history in a myriad of ways, this ground-breaking book is particularly exceptional as it situates American ascendancy in the region within the configuration of Anglo-American cooperation and anti-communist nationalism in Southeast Asia. The author holds the view that “anticommunist nationalism in Southeast Asia intersected with preexisting local antipathy toward China and its diaspora, to usher the region from European-dominated colonialism to U.S. hegemony” (p. 5). Both the British—attempting to put the brakes on its ineluctable withdrawal from its colonies in Malaya and Singapore—and Southeast Asian leaders tilted toward the United States to forge a strategic alliance that was intrinsically anti-Chinese. More importantly, British colonial and anticommunist project proved vital in shaping American Cold War policies in Southeast Asia.

Scholars interested in Southeast Asian history and politics will find the book highly informative and well-structured. It is divided into five main chapters. In the first, Ngoei sets the stage for his narrative, asserting that American policymakers' outlook about Cold War Southeast Asia was shaped by three interlinked factors: the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia; the Anglo-American colonial experience in Southeast Asia; and the perennial antagonism toward mainland China and its diasporic communities in Southeast Asia. The successful invasion of Southeast Asian states by Japanese forces during the Second World War, establishing military and political outposts in the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaya, Singapore, and eventually Indonesia, ingrained in American policymaker's vision “the dynamic of regional interconnectedness axiomatic to achieving ascendancy in Southeast Asia” (p. 18). The author further argues that this strategic thought consequently framed the nascent notion of domino in the region.

The Americans also placed more value on the British colonial policies in Malaya and Singapore compared to other European colonizers in the region. Three fact-finding missions were sent from

the U.S. to Southeast Asia from 1949 to 1950, and their findings echo British insights. In a report to Dean Acheson and Deputy Undersecretary of State Dean Rusk, U.S. Ambassador Philip Jessup noted that “his conclusions were ‘in accord’ with those of British officials” (p.27). In fact, U.S. policymakers’ views on the Chinese diaspora in the region also paralleled those of the British. After the war, the British had the difficult task of containing the two million Chinese in Malaya and Singapore who, they assumed, were vulnerable to the Chinese Communist Party’s political influence. In the same way, the Americans also thought of the overseas Chinese as a possible means for China to stretch its control in Southeast Asia.

The following two chapters provide a more in-depth analysis of British influence on the United States’ Cold War approach. The second chapter elaborates on the fascination of American policymakers toward British colonial policies in Malaya, which the former deemed as an “enlightened colonial administration” (p. 45). Perhaps this comes as no surprise, as the British were the last of the Europeans to leave its colonies in the region and in a relatively peaceful way. In the next chapter, Ngoei outlines American policymakers’ preoccupation with the British counterinsurgency strategies in Malaya. In the 1960s, he contends, “U.S. officials nurtured a fantasy that Britain possessed a magic bullet to kill revolutionary communism” (p.83). The author further asserts that, in fact, both British and Malayan officials took advantage of this preoccupation to bolster their alliance with the United States.

Chapter 4 probes into the formation of what Ngoei calls the “arc of containment,” precipitated by the rise of anti-communist states across Southeast Asia. This arc began with the creation of Malaysia in 1963, reinforced by Singapore’s successful political and security measures against socialist adversaries, and eventually completed with the demise of Sukarno’s power in Indonesia in 1965. In the final chapter, the author takes the opportunity to weave together the narratives introduced in the preceding chapters by conjuring a grand historical narrative of Southeast Asian transition from Anglo-American ascendancy to U.S. hegemony. In 1967, Southeast Asia witnessed the emergence of a regional institution that thwarted any possibility of further communist advancements. In this narrative, Vietnam’s capitulation under communism was the exception in the Southeast Asian saga.

What makes this book a compelling read, aside from its clarity and eloquence in articulating the intimate and entangled historical narratives of the US, Britain, and Southeast Asian states, is its audacious and apposite critique of Vietnam-centric scholarship on U.S. interventions in the region. The author skillfully reframes the subject by accentuating, and rightfully so, the interconnectedness of postcolonial Southeast Asian states. Ngoei is able to conjure an international history of Southeast Asia during the Cold War—one that integrates the viewpoints, interests, and actions of the different key players. While the volume is essentially about U.S. ascendancy in the region, it is so neatly placed within the context of the British withdrawal from the region and the emergence of local Southeast Asian leaders who actively sought for an alliance with the U.S.

Despite its numerous merits, *Arc of Containment* would have benefited from a more compelling discussion on the United States' political and military experience in the Philippines long before the dawning of the Cold War. The Americans were neither unfamiliar nor inexperienced with Southeast Asian insurgencies and anti-communist campaigns. In fact, they had a long experience in colonial administration in the Philippines beginning in 1902, which transformed into a "benevolent hegemony" with the establishment of the Philippine Commonwealth in 1935. Is it possible, then, that what the U.S. saw as the "enlightened" rule of the British was simply a way to reinforce and legitimize their own strategies that were defined long before the outbreak of the Cold War? Moreover, the Americans, in collaboration with Filipino leaders, launched a successful campaign against the local communist group, Hukbalahap (People's Anti-Japanese Army), resulting in its leader Luis Taruc's decision to surrender in 1954. Why would U.S. policymakers put more value on the British policies during the Malayan Emergency when they had a successful and more direct experience with anti-communist struggle in the Philippines?

Notwithstanding these questions, the book remains a great source of knowledge and strong assertions. It is excellently researched, well-crafted, and provocative. Anyone studying Cold War Southeast Asia will have to contend with Ngoei's interpretations. By offering a cogent alternative interpretation of the labyrinthine history of Southeast Asia's ties with Britain and the United States, *Arc of Containment* will stimulate other historians to revisit the history of postwar Southeast Asia.

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