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**U.S. Foreign Policy and Southeast Asia:
From Manifest Destiny to Shared Destiny**

Emrys Chew

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

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ABSTRACT

From post-colonial state to global superpower, America's relations with Southeast Asia—as with the rest of the world—have been driven by a peculiar sense of “manifest destiny.” Founded upon such transcendent values as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” the United States as champion of those values in the world has, time and again, rightly or wrongly, made a case for American exceptionalism if not interventionism. In its quest for security and prosperity, and in little over two centuries of its existence, the United States attained a measure of global authority surpassing George Washington's loftiest aspirations.

Yet America's global transformation into a new “empire of liberty,” with all its inherent ambiguities of power, did not deliver the freedom from fear that Washington had envisioned: from Pearl Harbor to Ground Zero, from Vietnam to Afghanistan. Ironically using instruments of American-led globalization—commercial airliners, the Internet, and cell-phones—against those other symbols of U.S. global dominance, the Islamic extremist terror attacks of September 11th 2001 have shown that even “hyperpower” is vulnerable at its metropolitan core.

At the “periphery” also, just as the United States has sought to refashion nations abroad in its image—from past ages of Western imperialism, world wars and decolonization, through to the Cold War and the “war on terror”—the diverse nations that constitute Southeast Asia have played their part in shaping the imperatives and dynamics of U.S. foreign policy. These cross-cultural interactions, perceptions and reactions, reveal both the extent and the limits of American power in the region. This historical study examines the distinctive phases and emphases of U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia, as well as evolving Southeast Asian perspectives on U.S. foreign policy.

Emrys Chew is Assistant Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He was educated at the Anglo-Chinese School, Singapore, and St. Catharine's College, Cambridge. From the University of Cambridge, he obtained both a BA with First Class Honours in History (1995) and a PhD (2002). His BA dissertation, ‘The Naning War, 1831-1832: Colonial Authority and Malay Resistance in the Early Period of British Expansion’, was awarded the Alan Coulson Prize for Imperial and Commonwealth History and subsequently published (*Modern Asian Studies*, May 1998). His doctoral thesis, entitled ‘Arming the Periphery’, traces the development and dynamics of arms trade networks in the Indian Ocean between 1780 and 1914, a critical period of Western imperial and industrial expansion as well as indigenous transformation across the frontiers of Asia and Africa. His other publications include an article about the impact of arms transfers on military culture and colonial warfare in Indian Ocean societies, particularly in light of contemporary debates about the international war against terrorism (‘Militarized Cultures in Collision’, *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, October 2003). Emrys has taught undergraduate courses on Imperialism and

Nationalism at the University of Cambridge, examining cross-cultural interactions that have generated and shaped much of the modern world. He currently teaches postgraduate courses at RSIS on the International History of Asia and Cold War History and International Politics.

U.S. Foreign Policy and Southeast Asia: From Manifest Destiny to Shared Destiny¹

From post-colonial state to global superpower, “from sea to shining sea” and beyond, America’s relations with Southeast Asia—as with the rest of the world—have been driven by a peculiar sense of “manifest destiny.”² Founded upon such transcendent values as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” the United States as champion of those values in the world has, time and again, rightly or wrongly, made a case for American exceptionalism if not interventionism. In its quest for security and prosperity, and in little over two centuries of its existence, the United States attained a measure of global authority surpassing George Washington’s loftiest aspirations. Not since Rome (and Britain even) had any Western nation achieved such supremacy.

Yet America’s global transformation into a new “empire of liberty,” with all its inherent ambiguities of power, did not thereby deliver the freedom from fear that Washington had envisioned: from Pearl Harbor to Ground Zero, from Vietnam to Afghanistan.³ Just as the United States has sought to refashion nations abroad in its image—from past ages of Western imperialism, world wars and decolonization,

¹An earlier draft of this paper was presented at a workshop sponsored by the William B. Ruger Chair of National Security Economics, at the US Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island. The workshop was held on 14-15 May 2009 and its overall theme was “American Foreign Policy: Regional Perspectives.”

²First appearing in print in 1839, the term “manifest destiny” describes the historical belief that the United States is destined—even divinely pre-ordained—to expand across the North American continent, from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific Ocean. So, too, the eagle in world mythologies was perceived as a divine and imperial symbol long before its reinvention as an emblem of liberty. Although the term fell out of usage by U.S. policymakers early in the twentieth century, some commentators note that aspects of “manifest destiny”—particularly the belief in an American “mission” to promote and defend democracy throughout the world—continue to have a pervasive influence on American political ideology. There is extensive literature on this subject: for a selection, see Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935); Edward McNall Burns, *The American Idea of Mission: Concepts of National Purpose and Destiny* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1957); Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1963); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981); Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³A comprehensive, magisterial survey is offered by George Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Also see Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (London: Penguin, 2004).

through to the Cold War and the “war on terror”—the diverse nations that constitute Southeast Asia have played their part, too, in shaping the imperatives and dynamics of U.S. foreign policy. These cross-cultural interactions, perceptions and reactions, reveal both the extent and the limits of American power in the region, a set of shifting policy objectives and reflex actions between American and Southeast Asian components.

What then were the critical objectives of American power—and how have they either continued or changed over time—in relation to Southeast Asia? To what extent have such objectives been either achieved or thwarted, when operating against the context of indigenous state formation and crisis? This historical study examines the key themes and issues that have compelled (or constrained) the distinctive phases and emphases of U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Equally, it explores the various themes and issues that have underpinned evolving Southeast Asian perspectives on U.S. foreign policy.

U.S. Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia

Since its birth as an independent nation with an independent foreign policy, the United States has cast itself uniquely as champion of a new world order built upon universal values of self-determination and human rights. Throughout the history of U.S. foreign policy, however, such notions of American exceptionalism have been manifested unevenly in terms of both the power of America’s example and the example of America’s power.⁴ Global pressures in war and peace, and the rise of American world power and influence, have tended to make more explicit what was always implicit in the ideas, institutions, and instruments of U.S. foreign policy. Woven into U.S. foreign policy tradition are almost contradictory, alternating strands of unilateralism and universalism, liberal as well as fundamentally conservative

⁴Whereas America was founded upon the ideal that all human beings are created equal and endowed with “certain unalienable rights,” it was also Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of America’s Declaration of Independence (1776) and third president of the United States, who recognized that the exercise of power in the real world can corrupt such an ideal: “Not in our day, but at no distant one, we may shake a rod over the heads of all, which may make the stoutest of them tremble. But I hope our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us that the less we use our power, the greater it will be.” See Thomas Jefferson Randolph (ed.), *Memoirs, Correspondence, and Private Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 4 (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1829), p. 272.

values, where ideals and national interests intertwine but have not always complemented one another; the Republican administrations have tended to place greater emphasis on military-strategic interests while Democratic administrations have emphasized human rights issues. The regions of the world—including Southeast Asia—have felt the influence and impact of such foreign policy imperatives, at times as assertive and expansive under a Democratic president as under a Republican.

There have been three main phases of U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia. First, a period of early adventurism and expansionism (1776-1946), culminating in America's colonial policy in the Philippines during the era of Western imperialism, followed by the end of that colonial experiment through America's promotion of national self-determination in the era of world wars and decolonization. Second, a period of anti-communism and ambiguity (1946-89), where America's containment policy during the Cold War was marked by a certain ambivalence in its support of authoritarian regimes while proclaiming liberal-democratic values in the bid to counter the communists. This period came to be dominated by the imperatives of the "domino" theory and "quagmire" thesis, as Southeast Asia became a critical frontier and the United States was increasingly bogged down by military-strategic commitments in Vietnam. Finally, a period of unparalleled authority mingled with uncertainty (1989-2009), in which America's post-Cold War global hegemony was challenged in such a manner as to require post-9/11 counter-terrorism strategies dealing with the Islamic extremist threat. Southeast Asia, as home to the largest concentration of Muslims in the world, became a crucial frontier once again in America's military-strategic calculations.

Back in the nineteenth century, U.S. envoys had negotiated commercial treaties with Siam (Thailand) and Cochin China (southern Vietnam) as early as the 1830s. It was, however, in the 1890s that the United States first took on substantive military-strategic commitments in Southeast Asia, when Alfred Thayer Mahan's classic *The Influence of Seapower upon History* (1890) supplied a persuasive rationale for a new battleship navy and a more ambitious U.S. foreign policy across the Pacific. At the onset of the Spanish-American War, battleships of the U.S. Navy sank the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay (1898), a spectacular victory that galvanized U.S. Admiral George Dewey and Presidents McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. In McKinley's words: "There was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to

educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ died."⁵

America's "benevolent assimilation" and "Americanization" of the Philippines, with self-evident "Orientalist" assumptions of cultural and moral superiority, moved well within the mainstream of Western imperialism.⁶ But when the Democrats won the presidency in 1912, the Wilson administration introduced a program of "Filipinization," giving Filipinos more seats on the governing executive council and larger roles in the bureaucracy. Congress passed the Jones Act (1916), committing the United States to granting independence as soon as the Filipinos could establish a "stable government"; even though the pledge was vaguely worded, it still was unprecedented in that no imperial power to date had yet promised independence or even autonomy to its colonies. By 1935, America had granted self-government to the "Commonwealth of the Philippines." Admittedly, with the need to defend its interests against Japanese aggression in the Pacific War, the United States could only make good on its promise of independence to the Philippines on July 4th 1946, while the retention of military bases and close economic ties would confer an almost neo-colonial status for decades.⁷

From the celebratory discourse surrounding America's "liberation" of the Philippines through to controversial debates about America's defense of "liberty" in

⁵General James Rusling, "Interview with President William McKinley," *The Christian Advocate*, 22 January 1903, p. 17.

⁶See Edward Said's seminal works, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 1993). Said argued that the "Orient" and the "Occident" worked as polar opposites, indeed that the "Orient" was constructed as a negative inversion of Western culture. Said also drew on Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony in understanding the pervasiveness of "Orientalist" constructs and representations in Western scholarship and reporting. Historically, these were applied in the exercise of power and authority over the "Orient" (and, later, the "Third World"): just as a long tradition of essentially romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East in Western culture had served as implicit justification for European and American colonial ambitions, so indigenous elites were equally at fault for uncritically internalizing Euro-American conceptions of indigenous culture.

⁷Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, pp. 321-29, 366-67, 411-12; Stanley Karnow, *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines* (New York: Ballantine, 1989), p. 247; Robin Jeffrey (ed.), *Asia: The Winning of Independence* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 263; Mark Beeson, *Regionalism and Globalization in East Asia: Politics, Security and Economic Development* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 120. In public demonstration of good faith and good will, as the colonial relationship was intentionally and formally converted to a more cooperative partnership between "equals," the timing of national independence for the Philippines itself reflected a shift from "tutelage" to "kinship." The birth of the new nation was timed to follow precisely 170 years to the day the United States had declared its own independence from Britain. For decades, however, the Philippines would be regarded as America's "baby brother" in Southeast Asia. Worse still, some contemporary scholars argue that the Philippines is an example of a failed democratic nation-state that can often lay claim to having one of the most corrupt, repressive, and incompetent regimes in the East.

the Vietnam War, there was nevertheless a persistent faith in the ability of superior American political, economic, and social models to cross and transform cultures. Even the most enlightened of American presidents accepted the need for international trusteeships to prepare indigenous peoples for self-government; and hence adopted a patronizing, ultimately dismissive view of indigenous societies, which in turn echoed a fundamental belief in racialized cultural hierarchies that shaped the broader Euro-American encounter with non-white peoples at home and abroad. For all their anti-colonial sympathies and internationalism, Presidents Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt were still paternalistic: the devoutly predestinarian Wilson assumed the superiority of Western civilization, the continued dominance of the West, and the role of American exceptionalism in regenerating the Philippines; the patrician Roosevelt saw the Vietnamese as children, a “small and passive people” incapable of governing themselves and thus needing external assistance from the West.⁸

Subsequently, just as one main phase of U.S. foreign policy in the region was ending, another was beginning. The outbreak of the communist-inspired Hukbalahap rebellion in the Philippines (1946) was followed by the eruption of communist insurgencies in Burma, Malaya, and Indonesia (1948). The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) became a fully-fledged communist state by 1950-51, and the Vietminh began to launch full-scale military assaults on the French across the Tonkin Delta region. By the early 1950s, the United States saw Southeast Asia as a crucial frontline in the global Cold War that America had to win for the preservation of the “free world.”⁹ But there were troubling inconsistencies in the way America managed its relations with Western colonial allies (as they contemplated decolonization) and Southeast Asian nationalist groups (as they pursued self-determination), for which there would be long-term consequences. Meanwhile, America decided to contain the spread of communism through the establishment of a U.S.-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954-55, which included only two Southeast Asian nations perceived to be reliably anti-communist at the time: the Philippines and Thailand.

In Indonesia, the Truman administration urged the Dutch colonial regime to promise independence for a nationalist group led by Achmed Sukarno. The

⁸Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition: The Treaty Fight in Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 9-13. Also see Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of a Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁹Clive J. Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 1996), p. 21.

Americans were prepared to support Sukarno (who had declared Indonesia's independence in August 1945) because he was non-communist, and thereby exert pressure on the Netherlands to recognize Indonesian independence in December 1949. Sukarno did not join SEATO, however, and instead hosted the first Afro-Asian conference of supposedly "non-aligned" nations at Bandung (1955). The response of the Eisenhower administration was to subvert Sukarno's regime by funneling arms and cash subsidies via the CIA to insurgents in an abortive rebellion on the Javanese outer islands (1957-58).¹⁰

In Indochina, by contrast, the United States supported the French colonial regime against the Vietnamese independence movement led by Ho Chi Minh. Although the DRV had been proclaimed by Ho Chi Minh in September 1945, using words drawn from the American Declaration of Independence, it was not recognized by the French because of their renewed colonial interests or by the Americans because of their aversion to Ho's communist credentials. The DRV's independence was recognized only after their Vietminh victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference (1954). By that time, President Eisenhower had applied the domino theory to Vietnam: "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have the beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences."¹¹ Even as President Kennedy reiterated that the United States would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty,"¹² America found itself supporting an authoritarian South Vietnamese regime under Ngo Dinh Diem until the Kennedy administration allowed army generals to dispose of him (1963). Following the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Incident and the Johnson administration's decision to "Americanize" the war effort with the deployment of U.S. combat units, the Vietnam

¹⁰Michael Leifer, *Dictionary of the Modern Politics of South-East Asia* (Third edition; London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 17, 63, 241. Also see Audrey Kahin and George Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

¹¹"Domino Theory Principle," Press Conference of 7 April 1954, in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1954), pp. 381-90.

¹²"John F. Kennedy Inaugural Address," 20 January 1961, available at: <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres56.html>.

War escalated into a “quagmire” from which America was unable to disengage until 1975.¹³

Vietnam left such deep scars in the American psyche that it led to a corresponding loss of U.S. foreign policy interest in Southeast Asia for the rest of the century. Whereas the Clinton administration eventually assigned Southeast Asia to an important position in America’s post-Cold War vision of a Pacific community, the emphasis on human rights presented a stumbling block. Only the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001—an “Occidentalism” assault by Al-Qaeda operatives on the very basis of American “hyperpower”¹⁴—had the ability to truly revive America’s strategic focus on the region. Home to over 200 million Muslims, Southeast Asia came to be viewed by the George W. Bush administration as a potential breeding ground with “safe havens” for Islamic militants. The uncovering of regional terrorist networks as well as some terrorist attacks, including several targeted at American interests in Southeast Asia, seemed to confirm this view.¹⁵ Southeast Asia was transformed into a key frontier in America’s latest global struggle—the “war on terror”—even as President Bush spoke of the “Liberty Bell” and affirmed that “the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands.”¹⁶

¹³Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, pp. 634-35, 661-62, 726-29; Leifer, *Dictionary of the Modern Politics of South-East Asia*, pp. 105, 118-19, 129. Also see George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam* (Fourth edition, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002).

¹⁴Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: Penguin, 2004). The reverse of ‘Orientalism’, ‘Occidentalism’ is used to describe reductionist, prejudiced and sometimes dehumanizing views of the West, including Europe and the English-speaking world. Such negative constructions of the West are often focused on the Islamic world and the idea of global *jihad* against the infidel.

¹⁵Kumar Ramakrishna and See Seng Tan (eds), *After Bali: The Threat of Terrorism in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2003).

¹⁶“George W. Bush Second Inaugural Address,” 20 January 2005, available at: <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres67.html>. In the post-9/11 era, the presidency of George W. Bush pursued one of the most controversial policies in American history, articulating a sweeping new doctrine of national security based on provocative ideas of American global dominance, the preventive use of force, coalitions of the willing, and the cosmic struggle between liberty and evil. As the “war on terror” expanded worldwide, and the invasion of Iraq escalated into a protracted conflict, the Bush administration increasingly invoked liberal internationalist ideas to justify its actions. However, contemporary scholars have mulled over the question of whether U.S. foreign policy under the Bush administration reflected continuity with America’s liberal internationalist past—from Wilson’s idealism and Franklin Roosevelt’s pragmatism to the Cold War realism of Truman or Kennedy—or, in fact, marked a radical departure from it. Tony Smith, for instance, suggests that Bush and the neo-conservatives followed Wilson in their commitment to promoting democracy abroad. Thomas Knock and Anne-Marie Slaughter, on the other hand, contend that Wilson focused on the building of a collaborative and rule-centered world order—echoed in the multilateralist trends of the present time—which the Bush administration actively resisted. If the latter argument holds true, it remains to be seen how far the new Obama presidency will return to, or transform, America’s liberal internationalist tradition. See G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Tony Smith, *The Crisis*

Southeast Asian Perspectives on U.S. Foreign Policy

Southeast Asia is “exceptional” in its own right, however. It is a porous, fragmented geographic region of tremendous variety and fluidity, consisting of both “mainland” and “maritime” components. Encompassing the world’s largest archipelago and major sea-lanes connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans, this region has been the historic setting for waves of cross-cultural interaction, involving cooperation and collaboration as well as competition and conflict. In both space and time, the lands and peoples that constitute “Southeast Asia” have found themselves repeatedly positioned betwixt larger forces—from both East and West—including China, India, the European colonial powers, and the United States.¹⁷ Inasmuch as they have evolved distinctive histories and identities within the region, the countries that are now member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have developed a range of perspectives on U.S. foreign policy.¹⁸ Generally, these perspectives have been shaped by internal and intra-regional factors (such as the evolution of indigenous societies and their relations with one another) as well as external and extra-regional factors (such as good or bad experiences of colonial authority and relations with the outside world).

Southeast Asia’s long-term interactions with archaic Indo-Islamic and Sino-Confucian civilizations, on the one hand, and modern Western civilization, on the other, have created a rich potential for cross-cultural tension. Such creative tension has resulted either in cross-cultural clashes or in cross-cultural fertilization between deeply embedded “Asian values” and newly imported “Western values.” Broadly, cultural perspectives within the region stem from (and tend to lead to) conservative

of *American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹⁷The term “Southeast Asia” is part of the diplomatic and academic discourse that evolved mostly in the second half of the twentieth century: from its usage in Britain’s wartime South-East Asia Command, followed by the American-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and then the independent Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), through to its application in late colonial and post-colonial scholarship. See Paul Kratoska, Remco Raben, and Henk Nordholt, *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005); Donald E. Weatherbee (with Ralf Emmers, Mari Pengestu, and Leonard C. Sebastian), *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 1-21.

¹⁸ASEAN was formed on 8 August 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Since then, membership has expanded to include Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. The only nation-state in Southeast Asia that is not yet a member is East Timor.

worldviews that value deference to authority; social hierarchy and religious harmony; the greater good of the community over the individual; and family loyalty in addition to personal virtue. Juxtaposed against such indigenous values would be “Western” liberal and atomistic views of society that emphasize the autonomy of individuals, normally under the universalizing banner of “liberty,” “democracy” or “human rights,” which might in turn lead to moral license, permissiveness if not decadence.¹⁹ For better or for worse, the lands and peoples of Southeast Asia have endeavored to negotiate their middle way through the entanglements of East-West cultural relativism. Just as America developed its own brand of “manifest destiny,” a variegated set of hybrid cultural values (including democratic principles operating in a largely authoritarian matrix) has gradually taken root across many of Southeast Asia’s multi-ethnic societies, all of which believe they are masters of their own destiny and yet part of a wider regional consensus embodied by ASEAN.²⁰

By no means unproblematic, the evolution of this “values debate” between the cultures of East and West has been made more complex in the region by the whole Western colonial discourse—especially the political legacies of “civilizing mission” and “the white man’s burden.” Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, indigenous political systems in Southeast Asia were subjected to the global projection of increasingly competitive, aggressive forms of European imperialism that were in turn legitimated by Western notions of transcendent law and unitary sovereignty. What followed was an irreversible transition from the traditional politics of the *mandala* to the norms of a “Westphalian” system: the finely balanced, layered concept of sovereignty shared by pre-colonial states located between India and China, which had also opened up various autonomous spaces for the inhabitants of Southeast

¹⁹Michael D. Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 3-11, 177-87.

²⁰There are, of course, inherent dangers in viewing liberal democratic cultures as a panacea for the developing world of today. See, for instance, Amy Chua, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (New York: Anchor, 2004), pp. 5, 11, 16. In the case of the Chinese minority in Indonesia—along with examples of the ethnic cleansing of Croats in parts of the former Yugoslavia and the Tutsi slaughter in Rwanda—the Yale University law professor Amy Chua notes that “democratization released long-suppressed hatreds against a prosperous ethnic minority.” She observes: “In the many countries that have pervasive poverty and a market-dominant minority, democracy and markets—at least in the raw forms in which they are currently being promoted—can proceed only in deep tension with each other. In such conditions, the combined pursuit of free markets and democratization has repeatedly catalyzed ethnic conflict in highly predictable ways.”

Asia's port-cities, was progressively displaced by the Western idea of indivisible, monolithic sovereignty imported under colonial conditions from Europe.²¹

Southeast Asia was divided somewhat arbitrarily into various Western colonial spheres and colonial states, whose borders would harden into the boundaries of future nation-states.²² For a number of them, however, the experience of divide-and-rule under Western colonial regimes proved so traumatic that it may have altogether de-legitimized the concept of empire, even a more benevolent American hegemony. With the exception of Thailand, which was never formally colonized, most of the nations in the region had to earn their freedom by winning a hard-fought struggle for independence—a struggle that turned especially violent in Burma, Indonesia, and Indochina. Even as the post-colonial order that emerged after 1945

²¹O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Revised edition; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), pp. 27-40, 126-54; Norman G. Owen (ed.), *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005), pp. 52-82. Also see P. M. Munoz, *Early Kingdoms of the Indonesian Archipelago and the Malay Peninsula* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006). Southeast Asia's pre-colonial polities—ranging from localized units to centralized kingdoms—often knew how to share power and divide sovereignty, thus accommodating ethnic and religious differences. Most characteristic of the early political history of this region is what is known as the *mandala* system (Sanskrit, *manda* = core, *la* = container), whereby clusters of small settlements (vassals) coalesced around strong rulers (overlords) in a loose geopolitical or economic alliance. With the coming of Islam, there were also *negara* that functioned as trading emporia or entrepôts. The region witnessed a succession of mainland and maritime states, including Funan, Champa, Srivijaya, Majapahit, Temasek-Singapura, Malacca, Angkor, Pagan, Ayutthaya, Riau-Johor, Aceh, and Sulu.

²²Western colonial expansion in Southeast Asia had been initially sporadic and relatively tentative: from the settlements established by the Portuguese at Malacca (1511) and the Spanish at Manila (1571), through to those established by the Dutch at Batavia (1619) and the Indonesian "Spice Islands," and those later established by the British at Penang (1786) and Singapore (1819). Thereafter, the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 effectively reduced the region to two main spheres of colonial influence, partitioning maritime Southeast Asia through the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, with the British taking the territories north of the agreed dividing line and the Dutch taking territories to the south. The British also fought three wars with Burma (1824-26, 1852, 1885), resulting in the pacification of the entire Burmese kingdom as well as the decapitation of the Konbaung monarchy; and they further presided over forward movements into the states of the Malay Peninsula (between 1874 and 1914), underpinned by the progressive introduction of a Residential system throughout the Peninsula. British sub-imperialism reared its head, too, in the colorful career of "Rajah" James Brooke: he created his own kingdom from the tangled portion of rainforest and mangrove in Sarawak, which the Sultan of Brunei had awarded him (1841) for military assistance rendered in the suppression of a Dayak uprising. The British annexed Labuan (1846) and would later place all of North Borneo under the protection of a British chartered company from the 1880s. Meanwhile, the Dutch also started to extend their administrative control over the outer islands of the Indonesian Archipelago, setting up a series of "border residencies" from the 1840s through to the 1870s. The French consolidated their own *Union Indochinoise* after establishing protectorates over Cochinchina (1858) and Cambodia (1863), and then Annam and Tonkin (1884). Long entrenched in the Philippines yet fearing the expanding activities of their colonial rivals, the Spanish at Manila decided to launch military expeditions against the Sulu islands (1845, 1848). Whereas the pretext had been the annihilation of Sulu's "pirate nests," these campaigns were really intended to thwart Dutch and British ambitions in an area that Spain located within its sphere of influence; Spain imposed an unequal treaty on the Sulu Sultanate (1851), with a view to excluding the commerce of other European powers. The Spanish would be driven out altogether, however, when the Americans eventually decided to join the fray, taking up the "white man's burden" by "liberating" the Philippines (1898).

inherited the legacy of a system of sovereign states with fixed maritime and territorial boundaries, one of the principal reactions to the colonial past has been the instinctive nationalist tendency to prevent or pre-empt any recurrence of extra-regional domination, particularly over hard-won issues of national sovereignty and jurisdiction. The significance of that new-found autonomy has not been lost on post-colonial scholars:

Throughout the length and breadth of post-war Southeast Asia, hosts of peoples were at various times flush with the excitement of post-colonial independence and assertive statehood. Born in the death throes of the Japanese version of Asian nationalism, decolonization gave birth to a new nationalist mythology that rode across the boundaries of the new states without pause. People were now citizens rather than subjects, and they were formally equal to Europeans. No longer subservient “Asiatics,” they were proud Asians who bowed to no white man.

Where the nationalist victories were won with blood—most notably in Vietnam and Indonesia—their leaders built personality cults presenting themselves as heroes of their people. Leaders such as Ho Chi Minh and Sukarno were able to use this enviable status to great political effect in winning the loyalty of their new citizens. In Ho’s case he not only used it against the French, but also in a Chinese- and Soviet-backed war against other nationalists who were defending an entire rival American-backed state. Sukarno used it to augment his considerable powers of rhetoric, manipulation and forceful leadership, and to identify the national will with his own.

The goal was not a state *per se*, since that had already materialized in the process of decolonization. They were trying to turn formally delineated states into something both aspirational and real. ... The citizens were encouraged to form bonds with the new state, and accept these bonds as an expression of nationhood—something more appealing and intimate than the mere accident of living within a national boundary imposed by a former colonial power.²³

The vitality and, in some cases, volatility of Southeast Asia’s post-colonial discourse on “nation-building” has prevented either the unwelcome assertion or the uncritical acceptance of any form of latter-day *Pax Americana* in place of former Western colonial regimes. Still, in view of their internal dynamics and their individual experiences of external power, there are nations that would be predisposed toward

²³Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2008), pp. 1-2.

maintaining closer strategic relations with the United States (such as the Philippines and Singapore) in their pursuit of autonomy, just as there are also nations that would prefer a more cautious, measured approach (such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia) in their guarding of sovereignty.²⁴

What may be agreed upon is that the distinctive phases and emphases of U.S. foreign policy have had, at times, a decidedly polarizing effect across Southeast Asia. In some instances, scholars and their indigenous sources have characterized the extreme reactions to U.S. foreign policy—various shades of “anti-Americanism” directed against what is perceived to be America’s economic, military, or cultural imperialism—as part of a more ambivalent “love-hate” relationship.²⁵ This shifting kaleidoscope would encompass both elite and popular perceptions of U.S. foreign policy in the region as well as around the world: from America’s policies as colonial power, through to its policies as leader of the “free world” and then as latter-day crusader against “evil-doers.” Underpinning all indigenous perspectives of America’s changing roles (including the rhetoric and doctrines of American presidents) would be the most basic of questions: America, our friend or foe, our benefactor or burden?

During the colonial period, the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902) against American rule demonstrated from the start how strongly Filipinos wanted independence, even from their American “liberators.”²⁶ Yet America’s subsequent promise of independence to the Philippines, and its clear determination to follow through on this promise, won Americans many admirers across the region. Thereafter, the United States was not perceived as a “real colonialist”; the anti-colonial attitudes of Presidents Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt—seen as defenders of freedom and democracy for all oppressed peoples despite the “Orientalist” prejudices of their New World paternalism—further endeared them to nationalist leaders in Southeast Asia, including Ho Chi Minh.²⁷ At the onset of the Pacific War, Roosevelt had written:

²⁴Although Thailand is one of only two Southeast Asian nations retaining a formal alliance with the United States—the other is the Philippines—Thai foreign policy is traditionally described as “bending with the wind” in order to avoid any form of colonial domination. See Michael K. Connors, “Thailand and the United States: Beyond hegemony?” in Mark Beeson (ed.), *Bush and Asia: America’s Evolving Relations with East Asia* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 128-44.

²⁵See, for example, Daniel Novotny, “Indonesian Foreign Policy: A Quest for the Balance of Threats” (PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 2007), pp. 103-77; Melani Budianta, “Beyond the Stained Glass Window: Indonesian Perceptions of the United States and the War on Terror,” in David Farber (ed.), *What They Think of US: International Perceptions of the United States since 9/11* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 27-48.

²⁶Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, pp. 326-27.

²⁷Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 2-10.

“Our course in dealing with the Philippines situation... offers, I think, a perfect example of how a nation should treat a colony or a dependency.”²⁸ “Don’t think for a minute that Americans would be dying in the Pacific tonight,” the president told his son, “if it hadn’t been for the short-sighted greed of the French and the British and the Dutch.”²⁹ In his inaugural speech of July 4th 1946, newly elected Philippine president Manuel Roxas responded with an expression of heartfelt gratitude, remarkable for the leader of a nation emerging from five decades of colonial rule:

The world cannot but have faith in America. For our part, we cannot but place our trust in the good intentions of a nation which has been our friend and protector for 48 years. To do otherwise would be to forswear all faith in democracy, in our future, and in ourselves.

As we pursue our career as a nation, as we churn through treacherous waters, it is well to have a landfall, that we may know our bearing and chart our course. Our safest course, and I firmly believe it is true for the rest of the world as well, is in the glistening wake of America whose sure advance with mighty prow breaks for small craft the waves we fear.³⁰

During the course of the Cold War, America as the capitalist superpower was seen to play a more ambivalent, polarizing role in Southeast Asian politics. America’s anti-communist containment policy and military-strategic support was regarded as vital to the independence and survival of some nations, especially against perceived Soviet and Chinese threats. Hence, whilst keeping the “dominoes” from falling and retaining access to key military bases, the United States ended up supporting authoritarian regimes such as that of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines—examples of “the tail wagging the dog” in this region. Singapore was also criticized for its close strategic relations with the United States, as its former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has acknowledged: “In the 1960s and 1970s, Singapore was berated in the Chinese media as a lackey of the American

²⁸Franklin D. Roosevelt to William Philips, 19 November 1942, cited in William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 180.

²⁹Elliott Roosevelt, *As He Saw It* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1946), p. 116.

³⁰Manuel Roxas, quoted in Jeffrey (ed.), *Asia: The Winning of Independence*, p. 26.

imperialists.”³¹ Yet America’s largely benign presence in the region would yield beneficial results for the destinies of many, according to Lee’s prime ministerial successor Goh Chok Tong: “The U.S. involvement in Vietnam bought precious time for the ASEAN countries to put their house in order and to lay the foundation for the grouping to develop into a cohesive organization. ASEAN economies began to take off, spurred by U.S. investments and a friendly American market.”³²

Others developed less sanguine views on America’s Cold War involvement. Indonesian leaders, diplomats and scholars still resent America’s interference in Indonesia’s domestic politics: subverting Sukarno when he went down the Bandung path of “non-alignment” and challenged the U.S.-led Western alliance in *Konfrontasi* with Malaysia and Singapore (1963-66); and then backing former general Suharto and his authoritarian, even corrupt, “New Order” regime (1967-98). According to these elite perceptions, America’s legacy as provider of economic and military assistance as well as guarantor of stability in the region was a distinctly mixed blessing that left a bittersweet aftertaste.³³ This ambiguity has, of course, stemmed from essential differences in the basic threat perceptions of small or medium powers in the regional context and a superpower in the global context: whereas America has tended to view the dangers to its national interests and to the Southeast Asian states primarily in military and security terms, the indigenous elite in Southeast Asia are more inclined to perceive threats in economic and internal terms. In addition, while enjoying the security guaranteed by the superpower, the smaller powers have no desire to be pawns in an American “great game”—contest or crusade—against another global power.³⁴

In the post-Cold War milieu, U.S. foreign policy has again proved controversial and polarizing, though for somewhat different reasons. Initially, there

³¹Lee Kuan Yew, “The Fundamentals of Singapore’s Foreign Policy: Then and Now,” S. Rajaratnam Lecture, 9 April 2009.

³²Goh Chok Tong, “ASEAN-U.S. Relations,” Keynote Speech at the ASEAN-U.S. Partnership Conference, 7 September 2000. Even here, in the case of Singapore, it is important to point out that the historical reality was far more complex in the transition from “survival” to “success,” from national independence to global interdependence. A founding father such as Lee Kuan Yew and a second-generation leader such as Goh Chok Tong may have been subscribers of the domino theory and supporters of the American presence in Vietnam, but they were by no means uncritical of the American democratic model and other aspects of Western culture. See Ang Cheng Guan, “Singapore and the Vietnam War,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 40:2 (June 2009); Fareed Zakaria, “Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew,” *Foreign Affairs*, 73:2 (March/April 1994); and Goh Chok Tong, “Social Values, Singapore Style,” *Current History* (December 1994).

³³Novotny, “Indonesian Foreign Policy,” pp. 112-21.

³⁴Robert C. Horn, “Southeast Asian Perceptions of U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Asian Survey*, 25:6 (June 1985), pp. 683-84.

was a momentary reduction and rearrangement of America's military-strategic commitments in Southeast Asia: most notably, the closure of the U.S. bases in the Philippines (1991) due to resurgent Filipino nationalism; and the provision of alternative military facilities in Singapore, out of characteristic pragmatism and continuing perceptions of America as an essentially benign hegemon. Singapore's then Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar observed: "[T]he United States remains an indispensable factor of any new configuration for peace, security and economic growth in the Asia-Pacific. Only the United States has the strategic weight, economic strength and political clout to hold the ring in the Asia-Pacific."³⁵ Conversely, the new era of American "hyperpower" also saw more assertive championing of human rights issues and American ideas of good governance that impinged on the asserted sovereignty of Southeast Asian nations such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, leading to a clash of political cultures between them.³⁶ Indonesia's then Foreign Minister Ali Alatas sought to deflect charges of human rights violations with a call for "understanding of the traditions and social values of developing nations, many of which were endowed with ancient and sophisticated cultures."³⁷

More damaging and divisive has been the fallout from a much-heralded "clash of civilizations" between neo-conservative America and a supposed monolith called militant Islam.³⁸ Even as the Bush administration assembled a "coalition of the willing" to fight Al-Qaeda and its affiliates around the world—expanding the theatre of operations from Afghanistan to Iraq and beyond—Southeast Asian nations proved broadly cooperative, though the extent of their cooperation would be constrained by domestic factors. Given their long history of collaboration with the United States, the Philippines committed troops and logistics teams to Iraq (as far as popular support would allow) in return for American defense assistance to enhance the "counter-terrorism" capabilities of the Philippine armed forces and police; Singapore made available naval bases that have a geo-strategic reach transcending Southeast Asia,

³⁵S. Jayakumar, "The Southeast Asian Drama: Evolution and Future Challenges," Georgetown University Inaugural Distinguished Lecture on Southeast Asia, 22 April 1996.

³⁶Michael Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 99-108; Karminder Singh Dhillon, *Malaysian Foreign Policy in the Mahathir Era (1981-2003): Dilemmas of Development* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2009), pp. 117-18; Novotny, "Indonesian Foreign Policy," pp. 129-31.

³⁷Ali Alatas, quoted in *The Straits Times*, 16 June 1993.

³⁸Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, 72:3 (Summer 1993). Also see Huntington's expanded thesis, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

further deploying naval and air support in the Persian Gulf for the reconstruction of Iraq.³⁹ In the predominantly Muslim nations of Indonesia and Malaysia, however, official support would be more qualified. Adding to the cumulative history of suspicion and resentment was more recent anti-Americanism directed against the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq plus associated cases of prisoner abuse—all taken as damning evidence of the unilateralism and anti-Islamism of U.S. foreign policy. Nonetheless, these countries have been cooperative in terms of information-sharing and pursuing the active elements of putative terrorist organizations (such as Jemaah Islamiyah).⁴⁰

There are, of course, other realities and priorities to consider in the post-Cold War international order. Against the imperatives and dynamics of U.S. foreign policy, key items on the regional agenda would include the rise of China (although India is rising, too); the pace and intensity of globalization; and the importance of regionalism as well as multilateralism in view of these challenges. Since the end of the Cold War, with China's re-emergence as a regional player of increasing stature in the Asia-Pacific, ASEAN countries have attempted a balancing act between the United States and China: facilitating the retention of U.S. involvement and forward deployment in the region, while simultaneously engaging China in political and military-strategic discourse. Lee Kuan Yew has underscored the impact of China's regional ascendancy on ASEAN's strategic relations with the United States: "Regional perceptions of the value of American access to Singapore facilities underwent a sea change after China published maps in 1992 that included the Spratlys as part of China. Three ASEAN countries (Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines) had also claimed these islands. That November [then Indonesian Foreign Minister] Ali Alatas said that Indonesia had no difficulty in seeing the merits of U.S. access to Singapore's military facilities."⁴¹

Analysts have thus subdivided the region into three categories. First, nations engaging with China but still placing greater emphasis and faith in their long-term strategic relations with America: the Philippines and Singapore. Second, nations

³⁹Ben Reid, "Bush and the Philippines after September 11: Hegemony, mutual opportunism and democratic retreat," in Beeson (ed.), *Bush and Asia*, pp. 145-61; Emrys Chew, "A Merlion at the Edge of an Afrasian Sea: Singapore's Strategic Involvement in the Indian Ocean," *RSIS Working Paper Series*, 164 (July 2008), p. 22.

⁴⁰David Bourchier, "The United States, Bush and Indonesia: Bitter memories, new eggshells"; and Helen Nesadurai, "Malaysia and the United States: Rejecting dominance, embracing engagement," both in Beeson (ed.), *Bush and Asia*, pp. 162-78 and 179-95 respectively.

⁴¹Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965-2000* (Singapore: Times, 2000), p. 538.

charting a middle course between America and China, mainly due to geographical distance from China and unease over pursuing closer strategic relations with America: Indonesia and Malaysia. Third, nations whose security strategies are dominated by their proximity to China: Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.⁴²

Given the vast economic opportunities, and the need to safeguard the flows as well as fruits of trade and investment in an age of global interdependence, ASEAN countries see the way forward in terms of both regionalism and multilateralism. In ASEAN's view, an expanded, reinforced regional architecture that engages and enmeshes both China and the United States can only be a positive, constructive development. ASEAN's aspiration is to embed them in a cooperative mechanism, thereby reducing potential for misunderstanding and enhancing prospects of stability. But while the United States is a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), it is not part of the East Asia Summit which is strategically important because—apart from ASEAN—it includes Asia's three major powers: China, India, and Japan.⁴³ Despite compelling statistical evidence indicating that ASEAN has become a more important trade and investment partner for the United States than Latin America, Russia, the Middle East, and Africa, there is an underlying sense that the United States is reluctant to nurture relationships with nascent institutions that may not yield immediate results, just as it is unwilling to accord its Asian interlocutors an equal measure of respect. Conversely, there are lingering doubts over America's fitness to lead the "free world": in the Bush administration's singular obsession with the "war on terror," the United States appeared to lose its way in the world on other issues—from climate change to nuclear non-proliferation—even as other nations increased their power and influence in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.⁴⁴

⁴²Evelyn Goh (ed.), *Between and Between: Southeast Asian Strategic Relations with the U.S. and China* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2005).

⁴³See the Asia Foundation monograph, *America's Role in Asia: Asian and American Views* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2008), pp. 1-8, 47, 52. According to Singapore Ambassador Tommy Koh, the smaller powers of Southeast Asia would much appreciate responsible public diplomacy rather than great-power games between the giants of East and West: "ASEAN would like the United States to continue to deal with China as a responsible stakeholder and not as an adversary; it would also not welcome any attempt by the U.S. to play China and India off against each other."

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 38-48. Tommy Koh makes a strong case for the rising economic importance of Southeast Asia vis-à-vis U.S. foreign policy calculations: "The U.S.-ASEAN economic relationship is substantial, growing, and mutually beneficial. U.S. investment in ASEAN is about US\$100 billion, exceeding U.S. investments in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan combined. U.S. investment in Southeast Asia earns the highest rate of return in the world at approximately 20 percent. The United States is ASEAN's second-largest trading partner and largest foreign direct investor. ASEAN is America's fifth-largest trading

Ultimately, however, even though partnership and multilateralism are themes that resonate far and wide, there is no escaping the fact that “past is prologue.” At the operational level, the U.S. Navy’s key role in organizing what became a massive, multinational humanitarian relief effort following the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004—off the coast of Indonesia’s Aceh province—certainly improved America’s image in Indonesia and across the region.⁴⁵ Still, there remains significant unease arising from perceptions of U.S.-dominated Western “media imperialism” facilitating a potential “fifth column” within indigenous society, or non-governmental organizations serving as possible “Trojan horses.”⁴⁶ In the wake of Cyclone Nargis, which struck coastal Burma in May 2008, neither the U.S. Navy nor non-governmental organizations were permitted by Burma’s military regime to intervene for fear that under the cover of humanitarian assistance, the United States had a political agenda that included regime change.⁴⁷ Echoing anti-colonial sentiment from the days of European naval dominance, there continues to be underlying suspicion that extra-regional powers such as the United States would use the threat posed by natural disasters, trafficking in weapons (conventional or nuclear), drugs and humans, as well as piracy and terrorism, to justify their longer-term naval presence in the region.

Framing a Pacific Future

Whatever their differences of perspective, the nations of Southeast Asia would all prefer a greater measure of clarity and consistency in U.S. foreign policy: less prescriptive, more sensitive. While proclaiming the virtues of liberty and democracy

partner and third-largest export market. Few Americans know that Southeast Asia imports twice as many American goods as China does. Two-way trade has grown 40 percent since 2001 and amounts to US\$170 billion. The United States has concluded a free trade agreement (FTA) with Singapore and has attempted to negotiate FTAs with Malaysia and Thailand, while also concluding bilateral trade and investment framework agreements (TIFAs) with other ASEAN countries. ... Energy passing through the Strait of Malacca is three times more than what passes through the Suez Canal and 15 times more than what is transported through the Panama Canal. This is the energy lifeline for China, Japan, and South Korea, as more than 80 percent of its oil and natural gas comes from or passes through Southeast Asia. In September 2007, the three coastal states (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore), the United States, and other user states met in Singapore, under the auspices of the United Nations’ International Maritime Organization (IMO); and created a cooperative mechanism to further ensure safe, secure, and efficient shipping in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore.”

⁴⁵For analysis of the sheer scale of U.S. Navy involvement in the tsunami relief effort, see Bruce A. Elleman, “Waves of Hope: The U.S. Navy’s response to the Tsunami in the Northern Indonesia,” *Naval War College Newport Papers*, 28 (2007).

⁴⁶Novotny, “Indonesian Foreign Policy,” pp. 163-70.

⁴⁷Tommy Koh, “The United States and Southeast Asia,” in *America’s Role in Asia*, p. 43.

to Burma's military rulers, or other parts of Southeast Asia with more volatile and authoritarian political traditions, America would do well to remember its patchy historical record of supporting right-wing dictatorships in this region and elsewhere. While championing its notions of good governance and human rights, America could display deeper cross-cultural sensitivity and patience when it comes to the apparent lack of progress, promoting more constructive diplomatic and developmental approaches over military solutions or economic sanctions.⁴⁸ After all, to what extent has America itself practiced what it has often preached to others?

The stress on liberty and democracy abroad—as visible indicators of modernity and civilized norms—raises questions about America's own long-term evolution at home, when modern America has periodically exhibited strong pre-modern features. In the so-called “land of the free,” formerly the home of the Amerindian brave, slavery remained lawful in the United States until 1863; and even then, with its reservations and segregated communities, twentieth-century America remained “a caste society whose marker was color, used to exclude a large social fragment from civil and political rights until the 1960s or later.”⁴⁹ In conducting its “war on terror” at the start of the twenty-first century, the United States again proved inconsistent with its own principles in dealing with terrorist suspects and political detainees in Guantanamo and abroad. With the application of torture being all that was liberal about the procedures, how was that culturally or morally superior to detention without trial under the internal security laws of Malaysia and Singapore? Vindicating the dreams of the founding fathers at long last, it has taken the almost ironic election of an exceptional Man of Color to the White House to restore some measure of hope in the promise of America for the rest of the world: inaugurating a new era of internationalism—both responsible and responsive—in which the United States pledges to listen more than dictate; dismantling Guantanamo while engaging

⁴⁸In demanding international isolation of Burma for its harsh military rule, America betrayed a profound lack of cultural understanding and historical perspective. “The most striking aspect of the Burma debate today is its absence of nuance and its singularly ahistorical nature,” observes Thant Myint-U, the grandson of former United Nations Secretary-General U Thant. “Dictatorship and the prospects for democracy are seen within the prism of the past ten or twenty years, as if three Anglo-Burmese wars, a century of colonial rule, an immensely destructive Japanese invasion and occupation, and five decades of civil war, foreign intervention and Communist insurgency had never happened. A country the size and population of the German Empire on the eve of the First World War is viewed through a single-dimensional lens, and then there is a surprise over the predictions unfulfilled and strategies that never seem to bear fruit.” See Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), especially pp. 31-41.

⁴⁹John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires, 1400-2000* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 26.

with others—especially the Muslim world—on the basis of “mutual interest and mutual respect.”⁵⁰

The nations of Southeast Asia would also prefer a greater degree of commitment and compromise in U.S. foreign policy: less unilateralist, more multilateralist. Singapore Ambassador Tommy Koh has observed: “Since the end of the Vietnam War, U.S. attention to Southeast Asia has been episodic rather than consistent, focusing more on security and defense issues. U.S. attention has been less engaged in the dynamics of the region—including economic growth and the development and strengthening of a Southeast Asian regional architecture that is high on the agenda of not only ASEAN, but many Asian nations. Since the September 11th terrorist attacks, policymakers in Washington have tended to look at Southeast Asia primarily through the unidimensional lens of terrorism.”⁵¹ The United States would do well to commit itself to achieving its foreign policy agenda in partnership with multilateral institutions in the region, paying more attention to the regional agenda rather than resorting to “coalitions of the willing” whenever American foreign policy aims appear to be thwarted. Such an approach would add substance to the new post of U.S. ambassador to ASEAN, created in 2007 in a rare display of bi-partisanship by Congress with backing from the Bush administration.

Exactly how America’s historic sense of “manifest destiny” adapts to the needs and demands of competing regional agendas in an increasingly “globalized” age remains a work in progress. At least there is now acknowledgment of a “shared destiny” rather than just “manifest destiny”: in the words of America’s 44th President, “our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared, and a new dawn of American leadership is at hand.”⁵² Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking on behalf of the Obama administration, has already declared that the United States “is not ceding the Pacific to anyone” in a measured response to the rise of China and the Australian

⁵⁰“President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address,” 20 January 2009, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/>. Again, for an insightful discussion on the future of American liberal internationalism, see Ikenberry, Knock, Slaughter, and Smith, *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century*.

⁵¹Koh, “The United States and Southeast Asia,” pp. 37-38. The collective wisdom of the monograph’s “Asian” authors suggests that America should sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which would allow America to be an effective dialogue partner with members of the East Asia Summit. It would also demonstrate America’s confidence in regional organizations such as ASEAN, ARF, and APEC (see pp. 7, 48-54, 233-41).

⁵²“Barack Obama’s Victory Speech,” 5 November 2008, available at: <http://www.america.gov/st/elections08-english/2008/November/20081105101958abretnuh0.580044.html>.

Government's defense white paper, which in May 2009 raised the possibility of American dominance fading in the Asia-Pacific region in the decades ahead. "We have longstanding bilateral relationships with nations like Australia and others," Clinton affirmed, "and we have a very active multilateral agenda that we intend to reinvigorate, such as our membership with ASEAN and other fora within the Pacific region."⁵³

If the status quo vis-à-vis Southeast Asia is maintained, residual anti-Americanism in parts of the region will likely still be outweighed by America's continuing importance as economic partner, security guarantor, and cultural exemplar. But the current shift in U.S. foreign policy is helpful to the cause. Although Secretary Clinton's visit to Indonesia in February 2009 drew sharp protests from hundreds who demonstrated against Clinton's pro-Israel sympathies and America's occupation of Iraq, officials welcomed her pledge of support for Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's suggestion of a "Comprehensive Partnership." Secretary Clinton's proposal to resume sending Peace Corps workers and Fulbright scholars to Indonesia would be a first step toward improving relations, indicative of America's support of Indonesia's hard-won democracy as well as its efforts to fight terrorism while respecting human rights. Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda responded by saying that Indonesia could be an effective bridge to help America reconnect with the Muslim world.⁵⁴

Clinton's trip was also intended to prepare the way for a future visit to ASEAN countries by President Obama. This is likely to take place when the president attends the 17th APEC leaders meeting, as well as the first ever ASEAN-U.S. summit, scheduled in Singapore from 13-15 November 2009.⁵⁵ The fact that Barack Obama is

⁵³Geoff Elliott, "Hillary Clinton firmly commits the US to Asia-Pacific security," *The Australian*, 21 May 2009. Secretary Clinton affirmed that the United States, which has a large naval presence at its Pacific base in Hawaii, "will be engaged—we are a trans-Pacific power and a trans-Atlantic power." Hence, the United States would focus on "deepening and broadening our engagement—we don't think it is a zero sum game; the fact that a country like China is becoming more successful or Indonesia is now a very successful democracy—we see that as to the good for the entire Pacific region."

⁵⁴Erwida Maulia, "Obama asks Indonesia to 'join hands,'" *The Jakarta Post*, 14 March 2009; Retno Marsudi, "Indonesia, the US: A New Partnership," *The Jakarta Post*, 27 April 2009. Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, has over the past decade broadly demonstrated that Islam, democracy, and modernity can co-exist, even if longstanding communal tensions persist with the Chinese ethnic minority. In Jakarta, Clinton also took the opportunity to announce a major review of U.S. policy toward Burma. See the UPI news article, available at: http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2009/02/18/Clinton-says-Myanmar-policy-under-review/UPI-10091234960636/.

⁵⁵Chia Chin Hon, "Obama to attend ASEAN-US Summit," *The Straits Times*, 9 October 2009.

only the third sitting American president to have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize—after Theodore Roosevelt (1906) and Woodrow Wilson (1919)—may even add further luster to what is undoubtedly a promising new dawn of American-led internationalism. Still, in the wider formulation and articulation of foreign policy on all sides, only time will tell whether the intertwined destinies of the United States, Southeast Asia, and other regional players would lead on to a brighter, more pacific future.

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