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America and Southeast Asia

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America and Southeast Asia

IF the present troubles of Southeast Asia are any indication of things to come, the history of that region and the role that the United States will play in its development will undergo a most critical phase in the next decades. The eleven papers which make up the present book* focus attention on some of these problems.

Designed to deal with United States policy in an extremely complex area of the globe, the papers cover quite extensive terrain: factors of diplomacy, history, politics, economics, even the so-called socio-cultural matrix are discussed in relation to the making of policy. It is noteworthy that increasing attention is being given to the Southeast Asian background. Thus John Cady presents a quick survey of the historical setting, while Clifford Geertz examines the "socio-cultural context" as each affect the making of American policy. David Wurfel attempts a sketch of the Southeast Asian response to international politics, while Roger Smith views American policy through Southeast Asian eyes. Charles Wolf, Jr. attempts a precise estimate of the "value" of Southeast Asia. All this is a step in the right direction, even though one may not always agree with the conclusions drawn therefrom, since policy cannot be intelligently formulated without an attempt to understand the particular conditions under which it must operate.

No survey could be complete without a discussion of those two important arms of American policy: the Foreign Assistance Program, which is here reviewed by Amos Jordan, and the SEATO, the possibilities and limitations of which are outlined by Russell Fifield. Paul and Genevieve Linebarger write on the psychological instruments of policy, while John Allison tries to define its limits. Even if, *per impossibile*, one could isolate Southeast Asia from the context of the cold war

* SOUTHEAST ASIA: Problems of United States Policy. Edited by William Henderson. Cambridge, Mass.: The M. I. T. Press, 1963. xiv, 273 pp. These papers were delivered in a conference held in 1963 in New York, sponsored by the Asia Society and the Association for Asian Studies.

realities, the problems would be complex enough. But Frank Trager reminds us, in an informative essay, that the overarching threat of international Communism vastly complicates an already confused situation.

Space does not permit critical commentary on each essay, except a remark that no attempt has been made to reconcile differing points of view, and that the quality of the papers is somewhat uneven. Charles Wolf, Jr. has managed to make his piece slightly unreadable, perhaps in his attempt to quantify the factors involved in policy making; and this is unfortunate since he has some very good things to say. Others have written highly readable papers whose conclusions however do not always commend themselves, at least not to the present reviewer. One can recommend without qualification Frank Trager's able account of the Communist challenge, which includes a perceptive evaluation of the Sino-Soviet "debate" as it affects Southeast Asia. To round up the book, the editor, William Henderson, gives his own reflections on American policy in that part of the globe. This, we think, is sufficiently important to be singled out for further comment.

At a time when the United States is painfully searching for an imaginative and effective strategy in Southeast Asia, the questions raised and the suggestions advanced by Mr. Henderson in 1963 are even more relevant to the situation in 1965. In the space remaining to me, I propose to consider, first, what Mr. Henderson understands to be the aims of United States policy; secondly, why he thinks it has thus far failed to achieve a reasonable measure of its policy objectives; and thirdly, what he regards as the requirements that must be met in order to realize such objectives.

If by policy is meant "a conceptual framework for the guidance of concrete actions toward the accomplishment of comprehensible goals," Mr. Henderson maintains that a fairly definable Southeast Asian policy has been in existence for a good many years. It is a policy which aims "to safeguard the independence of the Southeast Asian countries against the menace of Communist aggression and subversion, first and foremost by strengthening their military security, and secondly,

by encouraging their political, economic, and social development in freedom behind the secure barrier of containment" (p. 252).

If then a fairly clear policy exists, why has American performance thus far fallen at little short of the mark set up by it? There are many factors which have contributed to this divergence between policy and practical achievement, but Mr. Henderson emphasizes one of great importance: the fact that the Americans have not yet made up their minds. "The greatest weakness of United States policy in Southeast Asia since the 1950's . . . is that we [Americans] have never been sure how serious we are about the whole business." He thus poses the all-important question which the American people will have to answer within the next few years: "Are our interests in Southeast Asia really *vital national interests*?" (p. 252).

This question assumes particular relevance today since an influential segment of American opinion is definitely shifting toward what has been called "neo-isolationism." The neo-isolationist holds that "[United States] security and well-being are not involved in Southeast Asia or in Korea." These are the words of Walter Lippmann himself, who is only one of the most recent and eloquent spokesmen of this re-emerging mood in America. It is refreshing to note that Mr. Henderson's convictions are in direct contradiction to those of the neo-isolationists. Quite apart from the material and strategic importance of Southeast Asia for any world power, Mr. Henderson argues that its loss to the Communists would mean "an irreparable blow to the cause of freedom everywhere in the world and would fatally undermine confidence in our [the United States] determination and ability to lead the cause successfully" (p. 253). Nothing could please the Communist strategists of protracted conflict more than an American withdrawal from Southeast Asia for this would mean pushing back the front-line defense of the United States all the way to Hawaii. If such a disaster should be allowed to happen, there will no longer be any question of the Free World trying to contain the Communists. The only question will be, *when* will the Communist encirclement of the free World completely

wear down whatever little will to resist is left in the American people.

The first requisite then for the United States to reverse the trend in Southeast Asia is to recognize that its interests are vitally linked up with the freedom of Southeast Asia, that it cannot tolerate the domination of that region by a hostile power, particularly one with the vast potential of Communist China. Until its "commitment to the region becomes unlimited, and it has not been up till now," the United States will ultimately fail to achieve its basic objectives.

This means, first, developing an effective military policy. Since this military aspect of American policy has come in for a great deal of criticism, we must be clear on what ground an American military posture in Southeast Asia can be justified. This task has become increasingly necessary in the light of the widespread criticism that is being heaped on the current American position in South Vietnam.

An influential segment of the opinion-shapers in America today, particularly among the emerging group of neo-isolationists, criticizes American involvement in South Vietnam on this score: since the problems of that unfortunate state are essentially non-military, no amount of force by the United States and her allies can alter the situation in any way favorable to this side of the Bamboo Curtain. The best that the United States can hope for is a "negotiated settlement" whereby she can honourably extricate herself from this impossible and embarrassing situation. How the United States can honourably back down from a position to which presidential and Cabinet declarations have firmly committed her is a dilemma upon which the advocates of withdrawal do not wish to dilate. As further illustration of this kind of thinking, one might cite the popular argument which attempts to explain any deterioration in the Vietnamese military situation in the following terms: "How can Americans win the war in Vietnam when the South Vietnamese peasants themselves are not interested in winning it? We cannot expect the military situation to improve unless the South Vietnamese masses first give us their support." At the risk of being thought unduly facetious,

one might suggest that the chief source of attraction of this infinitely attractive argument is its ingenious attempt to pass the buck. This argument gained currency during the so-called "religious persecutions" of Ngo Dinh Diem in the Fall of 1963, and was one of the reasons why American opinion was persuaded to accept "personnel changes" in the South Vietnamese government. Although events since then should have demonstrated the flaw in the argument, it persists to this day. It assumes, in other words, that the *precondition* of improving the military situation is pre-existing popular support.

Mr. Henderson rightly reminds us that, in the chaotic conditions of crisis brought about by insurgency warfare, political and socio-economic reforms designed to win mass support cannot be the *precondition* to the achievement of military success. The American strategists and their allies cannot supinely wait for mass support nor can they claim lack of it as an excuse for the deterioration of the military situation. They must work out a military strategy which will cope with the Communist threat at every level.

To be truly effective, the American military posture must, first of all, be *adequate* to cope with the maximum threat posed by the enemy. It is possible that the local armed forces of a particular country, no matter how well-trained and highly motivated they may be, will prove unable to stem the tide of superior Communist strength, particularly if this is supported by Communist China. In such circumstances the only alternative to a Communist take-over would be forcible intervention by the United States. Massive Communist aggression must be countered with whatever force is necessary to frustrate it; no arbitrary limits must be imposed on American retaliation, making it absolutely clear that the heartland of the aggressor will no longer be held sanctuary in such a situation (p. 257).

Secondly, it must be *unambiguous*. The United States must make it absolutely clear that a Communist take-over of Southeast Asia will entail not only the risk of American involvement but the *certainty* of immediate military measures of such a scale as will effectively frustrate the Communist attempt. An ambiguous position may hold certain benefits to some

minds, but these would be outweighed by two grave disadvantages. First, serious doubts as to how the United States will react in a given circumstance will, in effect, encourage "military and other adventurism on the part of the Communists" (p. 259). One can think of several examples to illustrate this point. If the United States had made it clear that Soviet installation of offensive missiles in Cuba would entail the kind of response it did in October 1962, Mr. Khrushchev would probably never have attempted it. Similarly, unless Hanoi or Peking had any doubts regarding American determination to defend South Vietnam, the Vietcong would never have indulged in the raids which they recently staged against American installations in that region. The ambiguity of the American response diminishes the deterrance value of its military posture. The second grave danger relates to the morale of the Southeast Asian allies and friends of the United States: "lacking the certainty of all-out American support in the first place, the Southeast Asian government might oppose the Communists halfheartedly, ineffectively, or not at all." "The assurance of American backing in the face of *all* likely Communist challenges is a prerequisite for the maintenance of the Southeast Asian effort and morale in protracted struggle with the Communists" (pp. 259-260).

Thirdly, American strategy must be *suited* to the particular kind of military threat of the time and place. It is significant that the Communists have thus far not gained one inch of territory against the United States by means of direct, overt massive confrontation of the Korean War type of aggression. But they are successfully undermining the strength of anti-communist forces by indirect and covert means. They have mastered the techniques not only of internal subversion but also the tactics of a novel type of conflict called insurgency warfare. The American posture in the 1950's of "massive retaliation" was ineffective because it was entirely unsuited to this particular para-military threat. Mr. Henderson believes that there is no technical or military reason why the United States could not, if given sufficient time, help interested Asian nations to build effective counter-insurgency forces.

We cannot overemphasize the importance of this matter: there can be no substitute for an effective military strategy that will meet the Communist threat *at all levels* from the threat of massive aggression to that of local insurgency warfare and subversion. In the context of the current war in Vietnam, the American forces and their allies must be ready to engage the enemy in combat and show the peasant that the enemy can be beaten, that his terrorizing tactics can be frustrated, that indeed he is not riding on the crest of the wave of the future. The most urgent instinct in the masses, not only in Vietnam but elsewhere, is the instinct for survival, the security of life and limb. So long as *that* is in danger, the peasant cannot be concerned with the sophisticated problems of an American-type democracy.

To any mass of people whose security hangs precariously in the balance, one question is paramount: *Who is winning?* And unless the United States and her allies can demonstrate that their side is capable of winning on the battlefield, they have no right to expect popular support for their policies. This is why Mr. Henderson insists on the *prior* necessity of an effective military policy; for security is "simply the essential precondition for the achievement of over-all United States objectives in Southeast Asia." That the Communist strategists understand this truth perfectly is evidenced by Mao's statement that the gun is the ultimate political weapon. To quote Mr. Henderson more extensively:

If the security of the Southeast Asian countries is not safeguarded in the face of threatened Communist internal and external aggression, all other aspects of policy are futile and the other objectives of United States policy in the region become by definition unattainable. First things must come first, and in Southeast Asia security is the prerequisite for progress in the political, economic, and social fields (p. 254).

Here, I submit, is the correct formula for the proper balance between the military aspect of policy, on the one hand, and the political and social, on the other. While urging the development of an effective military policy, Mr. Henderson is equally clear that security cannot be divorced from the socio-economic and political development of a people. If sec-

urity is the precondition of political development and social progress, it is equally true that ultimate victory will in the long run depend on who can permanently win the support of the people. Security becomes meaningful only insofar as it paves the way for full development in the tradition of peace with justice and freedom.

The military requirements are therefore only one aspect of policy. "Beyond this is involved a much greater commitment of our [American] resources, our knowledge and our whole national effort than we have hitherto been prepared to make, in order effectively to influence the political, economic, and social development of these [Southeast Asian] countries along fruitful paths" (p. 253). Indeed it is unfortunate, says Mr. Henderson, that the United States has thus far failed to take adequate measure of these historic tasks. "They are, in short, nothing less than to assist purposefully and constructively in the processes of modern nation building in Southeast Asia..." This means channeling the course of the revolutionary ferments in Asia along the lines of justice and freedom, and therefore along lines compatible with the long-range interests of the United States (p. 261). The author recognizes the immense difficulties that stand in the way of a dynamic American strategy in Southeast Asia. "They demand a degree of involvement in the affairs of Southeast Asia that few could possibly have imagined a decade ago." No starry-eyed idealist, Mr. Henderson is aware that the failure of the American people to recognize their interests to be involved in this region may indeed "ultimately prove a fatal defect" (p. 252).

To recapitulate the terms of the problem: Southeast Asia, with her rich store of natural resources, her *lebensraum*, her strategic geographic location, is a tempting prize for any power seeking world-wide ambitions of expansion. Though an attractive prize for any would-be aggressor, Southeast Asia—politically and culturally divided, economically and industrially underdeveloped—is as yet in no military position to thwart a determined and powerful aggressor. The single most critical threat is the ever growing military capability of Communist China.

It is in the interest of the United States to preserve and help build a truly independent and free Southeast Asia. This requires, first, a military strategy which is adequate, unambiguous and suitable, one that will counter the Communist threat *at every level*. Secondly, this calls for an imaginative and vigorous program to aid the interested Southeast Asian countries in the gigantic task of nation building.

To these tasks the United States must fully commit herself because it is ultimately in line with her own interests. It is vital to her own security in the long run to deny such a strategic prize to a power, which has constantly singled her out as *the enemy* and whose potential to support her world-wide ambitions are as vast as those of Communist China. The loss of Southeast Asia to the Communist international movement would be an irreparable blow to the Free World. It would then be only a matter of time before it is completely encircled by the Communist powers.

Those who derive too much comfort from the so-called Sino-Soviet split will do well to remind themselves that the chief issue in the controversy between the two Communist states is: Who will lead the Communist enterprise in the revolutionary task of winning the world? Whose techniques can more efficiently "bury" the West? There is no evidence thus far that a military split will take place so long as the "common enemy," the United States and her allies, exist in sufficient strength to challenge them. An irreparable split between Moscow and Peking is likely to take place only after all resistance has been eliminated or when Communist expansionism has reached its permanent limits. *Then* they will quarrel about the spoils, but not before.

In the next decade or so, the United States must rise to the challenge that history has posed for her in Southeast Asia. The path bristles with difficulties. She must expand not only greater material, but, even more important, human resources. This calls for a new diplomacy. On the one hand, she must exercise great patience and understanding and give due respect to the newly-independent nations who are quite naturally sensitive about their newly-won position. On the other,

she must *lead*, for she is the strongest and richest power in the world and, as such, must exercise a moral leadership, not indeed arrogantly but with a firm resolution that those who undermine freedom cannot do so indefinitely with impunity and that those who at some risk commit themselves to the cause of freedom shall not be abandoned at the hour of reckoning.

If the United States should recognize that its vital interests are inextricably linked up with the independence of Southeast Asia from external domination, then the present reviewer submits that the battle is not for the United States to wage alone. We submit that the true Asian patriot, the dedicated nationalist who is committed not only to the independence of his country but to the cause of freedom throughout the world as well, should ponder over the other side of the same question: Is American strength and involvement vital to the independence of Southeast Asia? Can we really afford the luxury of thinking that our indigenous forces, no matter how well-trained and equipped, can adequately cope with a full-scale Communist aggression? Can we really believe that we can escape domination by "going it alone," by pursuing an "independent" policy in isolation or hostile neutrality to the friends of freedom all throughout the globe? We must not forget the awful lesson of history that during the two world wars Belgian neutrality could do nothing to prevent the aggressor from laying waste her land.

We submit that there exists between the United States and those countries in Asia committed to freedom what has been called a mutuality of interests. To lose sight of this community of interests would be a disastrous error for those policy makers in the United States no less than for those Asian nationalists who desire to see the independence of their countries continue in a free world. Faced with the common threat of a Communist China potentially one of the super-powers of the world, which with every year will increase the effectiveness of its nuclear capability, the United States and the free states of Asia would do well to recognize this community of interests as the solid basis for mutual cooperation.

If both sides do this, then the difficulties which presently divide them will, I will not say disappear overnight, but they will appear in proper perspective: they will be seen for what they are and thus will become soluble.

The present work then is valuable not only as an index of the growing scholarly opinion on various topics in Southeast Asia which impinge on American policy but also for making available Mr. Henderson's valuable reflections on the requirements of a realistic American policy in that region. We hope that he will enlarge his outline into a fully elaborated prescriptive book.

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