Review essays

JAAP ANTEN

Overburdening

Two books on the British politics towards Southeast Asia from 1943 to 1965

Peter Lowe, *Contending with nationalism and communism; British policy towards Southeast Asia, 1945-65*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, xii + 312 pp. [Global conflict and security since 1945.] ISBN 9780230524873. Price: GBP 60.00 (hardback).

T.O. Smith, *Britain and the origin of the Vietnam War; UK policy in Indo-China, 1943-50*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, xiii + 229 pp. [Global conflict and security since 1945.] ISBN 9780230507050. Price: GBP 60.00 (hardback)

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Before 1945 Southeast Asia was not often spoken of as a region. It had been recently created by Japan as the most recently conquered part of its colonial empire. When this empire collapsed roughly one year earlier than expected because of the atomic bombs, there was a vacuum of power and authority. Southeast Asia – with the exception of the Philippines – was assigned to the British as the South East Asian Command (SEAC). Yet the British were not able to adequately fill the military vacuum in the region. The Americans were anti-colonial and initially did not want to fill it; their stance was that colonies should become independent.

In *Contending with nationalism and communism* Peter Lowe describes the political and diplomatic role that Britain played in this region from 1945 to 1965. There is little attention for the deteriorating economic and military power of the country. In 1945 and 1946 the British economy faced nothing less than complete bankruptcy, which was only averted by US support and heavy cuts in the armed forces. Yet militarily the British lived for years far beyond

their means, not least because for decades they contended with the Asian power and authority situation. Even so, from 1945 to 1965 as independence movements grew and their empire waned, they particularly had to rely on their political acumen and diplomacy.

All in all, the British political approach to dismantling their empire, which in 1945 suddenly was expanded by the addition of Dutch and French colonial territories, was one of restraint, of realism, and it was not unsuccessful. Lowe does not explain the roots of this realism, a characteristic not always present in British history. I believe one reason is that years of military and military-economic planning at all levels of British government had taught them unequivocally what their limits were. After 1945, facing a different, post-war world and diminished British power, planners scaled back accordingly. This is an important difference with France and the Netherlands, which after the German occupation began to rebuild their countries and their empires: much more seemed possible.

Why didn't the British and anti-colonial Americans frustrate the French and Dutch in their attempts to regain their empires? Because of the Cold War, Lowe shows. From 1946 to 1950 the situation deteriorated greatly: communist parties and groups were active in the region, the Soviet Union attempted to expand its power outside Europe. Eastern European democracies were destroyed, the Soviet Union announced the Zhdanov doctrine which prescribed an uncompromising communism, Mao's army triumphed in China, and North Korea tried to conquer the non-communist South. As the main Western aim was to defend Western Europe it was not desirable to estrange countries like France and the Netherlands.

Lowe describes the British approach basing himself on British and, to a lesser extent, American archives, though not Asian ones. This gives us a great deal of insight into the workings of the British mind, but, for example, the Vietnamese remains unknown. To do justice to the region he discusses the states one after another, interwoven with elements of the general framework of decolonization and the Cold War as outlined above. It would have been better if he had also treated this framework as an extension of the introduction of the book.

Lowe has succeeded in keeping under control the complex knot of different perspectives, contradictions, actions and reactions. He does this through an abundance of well-chosen quotations and summaries of positions in chronological order. However, this constant letting 'the sources speak for themselves' does not work in a book. Like a schoolteacher Lowe should have imposed silence on his sources much more often to tell his story in his own voice. Now he causes the reader to lose the thread too easily.

It is not necessary to unravel the thread of his argument. Much of it will be familiar to those who have read Nicholas Tarling, so only a few of Lowe's findings will follow below.

Setbacks and successes

The title of the first chapter, 'The return of colonialism', refers more to France and the Netherlands than to Great Britain. The Dutch complained that the British acted too weakly in face of the disorder and Indonesian nationalism after the Japanese surrender in 1945. The book makes clear how the British Empire was faced with chaos not only everywhere in Southeast Asia, but even from Greece to China. The deploying of the large British military forces in the Netherlands Indies went at the expense of already insufficient resources for deployment elsewhere. Moreover, leaders like Nehru in British India, which was becoming independent, were unwilling to deploy British Indian soldiers to recover colonial power in the service of the crown.

Of course the British policy had major flaws. Lowe has some strong views on the mistakes of certain officials, such as the British governor in Burma, Reginald Dorman-Smith. Dorman-Smith failed to understand this complex country with its diverse population, and worked to suppress the popular and charismatic nationalist leader Aung San, which not only inflicted harm on Burmese society, but stoked resentment among the population and ultimately worked against British interests. By 1962 the British were supporting a brutal military regime in an effort to enforce their strategic policies. Moreover, British politicians were resentful because Thailand had declared war on the Allies when the Japanese marched into that country because, somewhat earlier, the Thai had seized areas of Cambodia – by then part of French Indochina. The Americans had a greater understanding of Thai opportunism in the war, and after the Cambodian territories were returned the situation began gradually to normalize.

In addition, less myopic British policymakers provided a counterbalance to the rash and hot-tempered officials. Lowe shows that British policy had a kind of self-regulating mechanism. Politicians not only listened to their diplomats and soldiers, but also to academics such as Professor B.R. Pearn of the Foreign Office Research Department. Realism quickly replaced ideas about temporary colonial recovery, even with the nostalgic Winston Churchill who criticized Prime Minister Clement Attlee's suggestion of independence for India and Burma. Then Prime Minister himself, Churchill, 'followed the same path as his predecessor and permitted more rapid progress towards independence in Malaya than contemplated by Attlee' (p. 1).

After 1950, however, British policy dovetailed with the United States' commitment to a global containment of communism, often supported by clandestine actions. These actions were often not very subtle and the British feared social unrest by this unilateral approach. They rightly believed that communism could only succeed if it was linked to nationalism and social unrest: the threat lay less in international, but foremost in, so to say, nationalist-communism.

British policy therefore focused on transforming colonial states into stable nation states, preferably client states. For if a state was torn apart, its demise could have consequences for its neighbours and thus for the international order. Besides, such neighbouring countries could seek protection from patrons such as China and the Soviet Union.

The Colombo Plan of 1950 supported this British approach and, in Lowe's view, it was rather successful in developing the region. As a military-political complement to it, some industrialized and Asian countries were willing to participate in a Southeast Asian variant of NATO. These Asian countries surely sought to avoid military confrontation and the British succeeded in convincing the belligerent Americans not to rely on military solutions. Early in 1955 the SEATO (Southeast Asian Treaty Organization) was founded, an organization that has often been belittled. Lowe admits that it was not strong, but assesses that if it had not existed, the political and armed advance of communism would have been easier.

A year earlier, in 1954, Great Britain together with the Soviet Union, partly from a common fear of too great a Chinese influence, booked a great success when the region, particularly Vietnam, was stabilized at a conference in Geneva. Yet this was the last time the British brokered major international diplomatic negotiations independent of the Americans.

However, British aims were severely undermined by Indonesia from the late 1950s on. Following the acquisition in 1962 of the last remnant of the Dutch colonial state, Indonesia sought the 'Konfrontasi' with Malaysia on the British territories in Borneo, which certainly did not long to become Indonesian. After much British political and military effort these areas, with the exception of independent Brunei, were finally united with Malacca as Malaysia. (Besides, British policy on the Philippines after 1945 was largely dictated by the desire to prevent the Philippines seizing these areas too.)

By now the British regarded President Soekarno as erratic. The Indonesian army seized power and destroyed Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) in a bloodbath. This seizure ended the Konfrontasi and Soekarno's rule too. The seizure had been directly triggered by the mad coup attempt by communist leader Aidit on 30 September 1965. The British Ambassador Gilchrist concluded five days later (p. 241): 'From various conversations I had with Aidit from April onwards I come to regard him as a man not quite normal in his mind (I mentioned the possibility of drugs at one stage) ...'

Malaysia was safe now and after hundreds of years Britain's role 'East of Suez' finally ended. Southeast Asia was fairly stable, with the exception of former French Indochina because of the escalating war in Vietnam.

The British retreat was accompanied by a deal about this: no U.S. intervention in British Malaysia policy in exchange for the British not openly criticizing American politics in Vietnam. The second book in this review takes us back to the time when Britain tried to make a difference in Vietnam.

Britain and Vietnam

In *Britain and the origin of the Vietnam War: UK policy in Indo-China, 1943-50*, T.O. Smith uses British and French sources to look through a magnifying glass, as it were, at one country Lowe covers, and finds an even more complex and contradictory political tangle than did Lowe. Here lays the great strength of this book (which is absent from the bibliography of Lowe's book, published two years later). Yet he shares one shortcoming with Lowe: he lets the sources 'do the talking' at the expensive of a clear narrative.

Britain and the origin of the Vietnam War does not start in 1945, but in 1943 and that is certainly a big advantage. The general framework within which to discuss Southeast Asia described at the beginning of this review is treated in greater depth. Smith points out that the allies were unprepared to cope with the situation in Southeast Asia because of the relationship between Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt, which Churchill cultivated. For years he set aside any nostalgia of re-colonizing the region and dampened the formulation of a policy by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs so as not to upset the anti-colonial Americans. For one, it could undermine the common war effort and besides, being much stronger, the Americans would do what they wanted anyway.

Only after the German surrender at the Potsdam Conference were some things settled and by then it was much too late: there was a power vacuum in Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, the South would fall into the sphere of British influence (SEAC), but the North would fall into China's. This arrangement would over the years lead to a strong division in the country, especially after China became a communist state in 1949.

On 2 September 1945 Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam independent and, in a surprising move, temporarily dissolved his local communist party concentrated in the North. The British realized that this Vietnamese 'independence' showed unpleasant similarities with independence in the Dutch East Indies and tried to prevent the same struggle and violence. In vain, because in spite of Ho's move, the French refused to negotiate with him.

That allowed Ho to play the nationalistic card and during 1946 he established his power in a brutal way, eliminating all Vietnamese opposition against him in the North. The nationalistic movement Vietminh became increasingly communist, with deeper links to China.

If Smith makes one thing clear, it is how the developments within Indochina depended on those on the outside. The value of his book lies in the detail in which he examines the role of Great Britain. Two central figures are Lord Killearn, Special Commissioner to Southeast Asia from 1946-1948 and his political successor Malcolm MacDonald, Governor-General of Malaya and Borneo. MacDonald represented a change in policy because of the declin-

ing power of Great Britain and of the Cold War. Britain decided more or less to support the French in their opportunistic choice of the playboy emperor Bao Dai as a 'strong man' instead of the communist Ho Chi Minh.

The book abounds with such policy changes and other kinds of actions by the various Western and Asian territories involved. For example, America initially found it hard to accept that the military equipment it loaned to Great Britain was passed to the colonial French in Asia, but later supported them openly. Furthermore, the changing tactics and strategies of Ho Chi Minh shows that he too was engaged in *realpolitik*. The British eventually formulated an Indochina Policy aimed at curbing communist-inspired national independence movements in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. But they were faced with an amalgam of various individuals and trends in French politics, especially in Paris, with the result that policy and agreements, for example on the status of Bao Dai, and numerous other policies and agreements were delayed or modified, but never ratified.

The French attempted to gain control over Vietnam, including the North, which was in the Chinese influence sphere. After three years, at the beginning of 1949, five years before the defeat at Dien Bien Phu – the number of deaths and injuries of all their forces combined had risen to between 100,000-120,000 in total! After reading Smith and Lowe, one can imagine what British loss would have been if they had themselves pursued military confrontation. Furthermore, one cannot escape the conclusion that the Cold War worsened decolonization in the region because the Americans shifted their priority from anti-colonialism to anticommunism.