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Introduction by Evelyn Goh, Royal Holloway, University of London

Why do key Southeast Asian states seem to cleave to the perception that the United States is a benign and stabilising force in the region, in spite of its debatable record during and after the Cold War? In *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions: Southeast Asia and American Power*, Natasha Hamilton-Hart demonstrates that the ruling regimes in these countries disproportionately support U.S. preponderance because they managed to consolidate domestic power with the economic and political resources that accompanied U.S. support during the initial stages of national development during the Cold War. Education, professional training, and experience subsequently sustained these cognitive biases within the policy elites.

The engaging discussion triggered in this roundtable between a historian, a Southeast Asia specialist, and an international relations (IR) scholar aptly captures the interest that *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions* will find in a cross-sectional audience. With this timely and elegant intervention, Hamilton-Hart re-enlivens three central debates in the literature on the history and politics of Southeast Asia. The first relates to the strategic character of Southeast Asia: is it a sub-regional cooperative steadily acquiring the trappings of a security community, an outpost of American hegemony, or the proverbial tail effectively wagging successive dogs? Second, do mainstream political science theories about interstate relations apply to Southeast Asia, or can more useful analytical traction be gained from approaches that combine historical and area sensitivity with meta-theory? Finally, and more broadly, what are the sources of American world power, and under what conditions might we expect this to change?

John Sidel is most explicit in welcoming this book as the “antidote” to a field that has been subject for too long to the narrow focus on ASEAN-led aspirations for regionalism perpetrated by some IR scholars. Joey Long also lauds Hamilton-Hart for providing a welcome alternative, grounded in domestic politics and ideas, to the boilerplate IR approaches based on balance of power and material structure. They go to different lengths, though, in their positive reactions to Hamilton-Hart’s thesis: Long reminds us that her thesis lends weight to earlier studies highlighting the importance of local collaboration in sustaining imperial power, while Sidel urges the need for further research making explicit the Gramscian form of hegemony that he sees Hamilton-Hart uncovering within Southeast Asia. Sidel and Long may have under-played the subtleties of some of the existing literature on Southeast Asian international relations. For instance, Alice Ba has delved into the awkward and often contradictory nature of ASEAN’s negotiated compromises on separating out extra-regional subordination to great powers, especially the United States, from the complexities of sub-regional power asymmetries.¹ The third reviewer here, John Ciorciari, has explored elsewhere the strategic costs that limit the extent (if not the substance) of overt support for the U.S. in terms of military alignment; while I have unpacked the social dynamics sustaining U.S. hegemony in the evolving East Asian

¹ Alice D. Ba, *[Re]Negotiating East and Southeast Asia: Region, Regionalism, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

hierarchical order that involve not only complicity but also resistance from Southeast Asian states.²

Be that as it may, the state-centric, systemic biases of mainstream IR approaches are clearly insufficient for understanding Southeast Asian foreign and security policies and relations. Sidel's suggestion that *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions* points to the need for future research on U.S. power in the region that pushes the boundaries of explicitly Gramscian analyses of hegemony is one that ought to be heeded by IR scholars intent on more trenchant interpretations of East Asian politics. At the same time, Ciorciari's caution that these accounts must still incorporate crucial external factors is well-founded, especially in the contemporary period when the China factor looms so large for Southeast Asia. The positive and supportive reception by some Southeast Asian states towards the Obama administration's ongoing 'pivot' to Asia does not signal a diminishing concern with how to manage China's rise in a non-antagonistic fashion. Indeed, the Southeast Asian states that Hamilton-Hart studies must now face the challenges of playing not one, but two collaborative great power games.

The greatest service that Hamilton-Hart has rendered to the field is in fleshing out the crucial roots of U.S. hegemony in Southeast Asian complicity, and in demonstrating the functioning of a de facto *blocco storico* (historic block) within the small circuit of Southeast Asian policy elites. Her findings suggest that within and beyond the state-centric focus, U.S. power is more entrenched beyond sheer military might than many realise. This embeddedness, this on-going re-inscription of the 'common-sense' of U.S. benignity, is hard, but not impossible, to dislodge. She does not push this point, but Hamilton-Hart's analysis suggests above all that China's rise also presents more pressing challenges to U.S. hegemony in Southeast Asia than we might think. While much of the IR field concentrates on staggering economic growth figures or military bean-counting, *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions* alerts us to a more salient arena: the changing balance of benefits that Southeast Asian regimes are able to derive from the external great powers. China offers the ruling regimes and elites in the region significant economic and political resources to bolster themselves against liberalising forces domestically and pressures to conform with western norms globally. For scholars able to marshal the sources, there is potential here for a fascinating parallel study of growing economic and political dependencies and complicity that are being forged between China and Southeast Asian states. Herein might be found the roots of a potential revolution against U.S. hegemony.

As Long points out, the pro-U.S. group-think within certain Southeast Asian tertiary and professional training institutions may be less severe than Hamilton-Hart suggests. As this collection of essays demonstrates, the community of scholars invested in understanding

² John D. Ciorciari, *The Limits of Alignment: Southeast Asia and the Great Powers since 1975* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010); Evelyn Goh, "Hierarchy and the Role of the United States in the East Asian Security Order," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 8:3 (September 2008): 353-377; Evelyn Goh, "Hierarchy, Complicity and Resistance: China and the Regional Order in East Asia," paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, March 2011, Montréal.

and explaining Southeast Asia is sufficiently diverse that it has a good chance of achieving the type of inter-disciplinary work that this book ultimately draws us towards.

Participants:

Natasha Hamilton-Hart received her Ph.D. from Cornell University and held positions at the Australian National University and the National University of Singapore before joining the University of Auckland Business School. In addition to *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions: Southeast Asia and American Power* she is the author of *Asian States, Asian Bankers: Central Banking in Southeast Asia*, also with Cornell University Press. Her current research interests are in the political economy of monetary policy in Southeast Asia and the evolution of property rights institutions in the palm oil sector of Indonesia and Malaysia.

Evelyn Goh (DPhil, Oxford) is Reader [Associate Professor] in International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her research interests are East Asian security and international relations theory. Key publications include *Constructing the US Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974: From Red Menace to Tacit Ally* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies", *International Security* 32:3, Winter 2007/8, pp.113-157. She is currently working on a book project on the re-negotiation of order in post-Cold War East Asia, contracted with Oxford University Press.

John D. Ciorciari is an Assistant Professor at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. He is the author of *The Limits of Alignment* (Georgetown University Press, 2010) and has authored a number of journal articles and book chapters on the international relations of the Asia-Pacific region. He is currently co-authoring a book with Anne Heindel entitled *Hybrid Justice* on the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal in Cambodia. He has been a postdoctoral fellow at Stanford University's Asia-Pacific Research Center and Hoover Institution, a policy official covering Asia in the U.S. Treasury Department between 2004 and 2007, and a Visiting Research Fellow at the Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. He is a Bernard Schwartz fellow of the Asia Society and term member of the Council on Foreign Relations. He holds a J.D. from Harvard and D.Phil. from Oxford.

S.R. Joey Long is Assistant Professor of History at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He received his Ph.D. in History from the University of Cambridge in 2006. He is the author of *Safe for Decolonization: The Eisenhower Administration, Britain, and Singapore* (Kent State University Press, 2011), and of articles published in *Diplomatic History*, *European Journal of International Relations*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, and *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. He is currently working on a book project that investigates Singapore-U.S. international relations between 1965 and 1975.

John T. Sidel is the Sir Patrick Gillam Professor of International and Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is the author of *Capital*,

Coercion, and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines (Stanford University Press, 1999), (with Eva-Lotta Hedman) *Philippine Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century: Colonial Legacies, Postcolonial Trajectories* (Routledge, 2000), *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia* (Cornell University Press, 2006), and *The Islamist Threat in Southeast Asia: A Reassessment* (East-West Center, 2007). His book *Republicanism, Communism, Islam: Cosmopolitan Origins of Revolution in Southeast Asia* is expected to be published in 2013.

Review by John D. Ciorciari, University of Michigan

Hard Interests, Soft Illusions is an engaging book that makes an important original contribution to the study of international relations in Southeast Asia. Natasha Hamilton-Hart sets out to explain why foreign policy elites in six key countries—Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines—have tended to perceive the United States as a “relatively benign external power” (2) and thus have consented to U.S. primacy in the region.

Her thesis is that the prevailing elite perception of a benign America is not simply “the product of conscious processes of evaluation and probabilistic reasoning” (10). Instead, it reflects “illusions”—a combination of foundational beliefs and attitudes arising from the “epistemic environment” foreign policymakers inhabit and various cognitive shortcuts and affective responses, which together shape beliefs in a manner consistent with the interests of key “powerholders” (9-11). She contends that these beliefs about the United States “may turn out to be more or less accurate, but their relative accuracy is largely incidental” (11). Her primary focus is on how such beliefs and attitudes take root. She asserts that they derive “far more from social authority and ‘doing’ than self-conscious reasoning” and reflection on the evidence (15) and identifies national historical narratives and professional training and experience as two key inputs sustaining the image of benign American power.

Hamilton-Hart notes that the book “does not address the question of which foundational beliefs about the United States are correct” (15). She is wise to avoid assessing the benignity of U.S. influence herself, which would require difficult value judgments and counterfactual gymnastics. Yet the term “illusion” does suggest divergence between elite perceptions and the available empirical evidence and necessitates comparison between elite views and facts on the ground. For Hamilton-Hart’s purposes, it suffices to show that the evidence is mixed and would lead a reasonable person to ask more critical questions about the nature of U.S. influence and perhaps arrive at different conclusions than those of many foreign policy elites. Throughout the book, she introduces evidence that suggests a less benign U.S. legacy, such as the development of capitalist economies with unequal wealth distribution, political regimes that harshly stifled opposition from the left, and mass casualties from U.S. military campaigns in Indochina. Indeed, there is evidence to support a range of views on whether and when the United States has been a benign force in the region.

Positive images of the United States have prevailed, she contends, because American power enriches powerholders in each state and helps them guard against domestic opponents. Hamilton-Hart argues that “the ‘national interest’ that is repeatedly invoked by policymakers does not exist in any objective, determined fashion” (17). What matters are elite interests, especially at the time when strategic alignments were formed. The pro-U.S. alignments of noncommunist Southeast Asian states were “the outcome of domestic power struggles” rather than an effort to achieve a desired balance of power in the region (22). Moreover, conservative governments committed to economic strategies that “entrenched

an economic structure oriented to the U.S. market” (24). Southeast Asian officials thereafter had incentives to adopt “self-serving beliefs” (32) of benign American power. Bureaucratic training and practice reinforced simplified positive views of U.S. influence, an effect that was partly due to confirmation bias and anchoring effects.

It is certainly true that U.S. influence has advanced the domestic interests of some Southeast Asian elites and provided them with incentives to welcome a strong American role in the region. Hamilton-Hart’s discussion of likely cognitive and organizational biases and the importance of path-dependence is also convincing, at least for mid-level officials more likely to be bound by social and organizational pressures. Nevertheless, her argument suggests a few possible challenges.

First, it is not clear how important “soft illusions” (12) are as causal drivers or supports for policy behavior. Hamilton-Hart acknowledges that policymakers are apt to “update their beliefs when information becomes sufficiently compelling or engages their personal interests” and asserts that they are “unlikely to misperceive their interests (or behavior that impinges on their interests) over the long term” (41). Leaders are apt to be particularly sensitive to regime interests and to change policy course if necessary. With the exception of Vietnam, pro-U.S. alignments have remained relatively intact in the cases she evaluates. The calculated protection of “hard interests” (12) offers a powerful explanation for those alignment postures. “Soft illusions” appear more relevant to the maintenance of a foreign policy apparatus to defend those policies, yet in the two states with longstanding formal alliances with Washington—Thailand and the Philippines—Hamilton-Hart shows that the penetration of pro-American illusions is spotty.

Second, the argument leaves little space for external factors in alignment calculations. Hamilton-Hart emphasizes the extent to which pro-U.S. alignments and ASEAN helped area governments ward off local communist forces during the Cold War but downplays the extent to which they have been a means for managing intra-regional rivalries and external threats. These have sometimes been important factors in the maintenance, establishment, or reinvigoration of pro-U.S. alignments. Examples include Thai concerns about the Vietnamese army during the 1980s, contemporary Philippine and Vietnamese sparring with China over the Paracel and Spratly Islands, longstanding Singaporean concerns about instability in Malaysia or Indonesia, and a broadly shared regional interest in freedom of navigation. None of these is an indelible objective national interest, but none is a narrowly partisan domestic regime interest either.

Hamilton-Hart contends that “for America’s longstanding friends and allies in the region, the most frequent justification for viewing the country as a benign, stabilizing force is its historical record” (88). Official historical narratives help perpetuate the image of U.S. benignity by painting communists as “treasonous...and ungodly” in non-communist states, highlighting other external threats, and sweeping casualties of past U.S. interventions under the rug (89-90). That claim is most convincing in the cases of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, where invocation of the local struggle against communists led to a “refracted picture” (89) of the United States as a force for good. As Hamilton-Hart notes, however, more sympathetic histories of the left in each of the three states have recently

been more possible. Scholars in Thailand and the Philippines have had more room for divergent historical accounts, which have been “mixed” and show “ambivalence” about the U.S. role (119, 125). In Vietnam, Hamilton-Hart stresses the shift from histories focused on U.S. imperialism to accounts highlighting centuries of Chinese aggression, which increasingly paint the U.S. war in Vietnam as an American “mistake” to be forgiven (129). In all of these states, elite opinions have tended to track content analysis of official histories, though it is difficult to distinguish the chicken from the egg.

In interviews—as in official histories and rhetoric—Hamilton-Hart finds that “[i]nformation about the aggressive and destructive aspects of the United States role in the region tends to be forgotten” (163). Few interviewees mentioned the U.S. bombardment of Cambodia or Laos, enormous civilian casualties in Vietnam, or other pieces of evidence that would paint a less benign image of America. The fact that officials downplay U.S. harm elsewhere is certainly consistent with the notion that they view the American role in the region through the lens of their own interests, but it does not necessarily mean that policymakers are not evaluating evidence or exercising cost-benefit calculations. It merely suggests that policymakers put great weight on U.S. behavior toward their own governments or states and care less about the fate of other populations. This may explain the discrepancy between the ‘true believers’ in U.S. primacy—Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore—and the states where Hamilton-Hart finds more ambivalence.

One of the most convincing parts of the book relates to Southeast Asian officials’ on-the-job experience and training. Hamilton-Hart argues that professional experience serves as an important “source of evidence and interpretive schema” that informs their views of American power (143). Training tends to reinforce pro-U.S. views. Information available to foreign policymakers is “slanted” toward positive images of the United States, and “those with high status and gatekeeping roles define what is authoritative” (188)—often in a way that favors America and thus advances their domestic political interests. She stresses that a significant part of officials’ experience and training involves engagement with U.S. officials or citizens, often through overseas study tours, ‘track-two’ forums, and conferences sponsored by American entities. Some officials are wary of criticizing the American government at U.S.-sponsored conference for fear of being disinvited to future events (174). She also notes that most foreign policy elites obtain their information from mainstream Anglo-American news sources.

Lurking behind these factors is the issue of language, which merits further emphasis. English has been the accepted *lingua franca* in ASEAN and other diplomatic forums and is the overwhelming medium of communication in track-two activities, academic conferences, and regional publications. That encourages aspiring Southeast Asian diplomats to master English—partly by regular engagement with Western people, media, and scholarly works—and means that the individuals promoted to senior diplomatic posts are disproportionately apt to have a level of familiarity, comfort—and perhaps therefore a sense of added trust—communicating with Americans.

The book’s discussions of history, education, and professional training and networks rely considerably on a series of seventy-four interviews Hamilton-Hart conducted with

Southeast Asian foreign policy officials between 2007 and 2009. The revelations from those interviews are fascinating, and although most identities are concealed, it is apparent that she was able to access numerous officials at high levels of the six governments she examines. As she acknowledges, however, it is difficult to ascertain how representative a sample she obtained. If the individuals who agreed to be interviewed were disproportionately drawn from the English-speaking ASEAN-ISIS circuit, a network of regional think tanks, their views may well be more pro-American than the norm.

There is also the lingering question of how much mid-level policymakers' attitudes matter. Hamilton-Hart finds that professional bureaucrats often learn the policy goals of senior politicians through interaction and appear to internalize them as uncontested 'national interests'" (154). She also stresses bureaucrats' "[p]reoccupation with the trivia of daily routine" (158). This returns to a question raised above: if these officials are adopting their views of America from senior leaders and carrying out orders reasonably faithfully, how important are their beliefs to policy outcomes?

The forces Hamilton-Hart emphasizes may not be as determinative of state behavior as her analysis suggests, but they undoubtedly contribute to the extent and durability of perceptions of the United States as a benign power in many Southeast Asian capitals. By laying out her claims forcefully, Hamilton-Hart demands that her readers look more critically at the material and ideational bases for U.S. primacy in the region. She also calls upon analysts of Southeast Asia to consider how ideas and perceptions of the great powers will evolve as power distributions and cross-border linkages change in the decades ahead. *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions* is thus a valuable contribution to the discipline and a book that deserves the careful attention of scholars and policymakers alike.

Beliefs about the United States have shaped the manner in which Southeast Asians view Washington's place and role in the contemporary Asia-Pacific. One of the dominant beliefs held by policymakers in the region as well as scholars of the international politics of the Asia-Pacific region is that the United States is a benign actor whose power and presence stabilize regional politics. For many Southeast Asian elites, the accepted wisdom is that American power is ultimately nonthreatening—even positive. American primacy in Asia is also rarely questioned. Rising Chinese power, on the other hand, makes many Southeast Asian practitioners and analysts sweat. As China expends its treasury on seemingly awe-inspiring carrier-killing missiles and fancy blue-water naval platforms, calls invariably spring forth from Southeast Asian governments for Washington to remain engaged in the region's affairs and act as a stabilizing influence—read counterbalance Chinese power—in the Asia-Pacific. However cuddly it is, the perception is that the Chinese panda is more likely to swipe its sharp-clawed paws when it does not get its way. There is less to fear of the country of the ever-smiling Yogi Bear.

Take the red pill, Natasha Hamilton-Hart urges. Surveying the history of American and Chinese interventions in Southeast Asia, she finds that Uncle Sam has upended more governments, supported more repressive regimes, destabilized more political developments, and directly or indirectly caused the deaths of more people in that subregion than Beijing. Yet ruling elites, opinion makers, and powerbrokers in Southeast Asia continue to view America as a benign actor in Asia. This puzzling Stockholm Syndrome-like attachment to the United States also manifests itself in their support for continued American dominance and leadership of the regional order. Hamilton-Hart, to be sure, does not attribute the Southeast Asians' proclivities and foreign policy preferences to that paradoxical psychological phenomenon. Nor have Southeast Asian elites been duped into holding such beliefs.

Drawing from a body of work in political economy, cognitive and social psychology, and historiography, Hamilton-Hart instead argues that self-serving regime interests, and worldviews shaped by state-sanctioned historical narratives and uncritically pro-American professional reports and opinions, explain the positive sentiments that the elites hold toward Washington. Members of the ruling regimes and those associated with them champion pro-American policies because they benefit materially, politically, and professionally from those moves. State-approved historical works, experts' analyses, and an information environment friendly to U.S. interests further generate and buttress favorable views of the United States. The ostensibly learned opinions may or may not be veridical. But in the Southeast Asian marketplace of ideas, they sustain positive beliefs about the United States, and help to preserve the flow of economic and political benefits to ruling regimes that profit from pro-Americanism. Even as the ruling regimes consolidate and maintain their holds over their states, regime interests ultimately become conflated with the national interests of the Southeast Asian states, and eventually the interests of the region. One of those key interests is the preservation of the American presence in the regional order.

Hamilton-Hart skillfully develops these ideas in her exceptionally stimulating book, *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions*. Investigating political and economic developments in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, she provides a credible account of how Southeast Asian political groups exploited direct American assistance and the economic resources obtained from the alignment of their states with Washington in order to crush or marginalize domestic opponents, buy off dissent, and reward allies. These moves enabled the regimes to secure and preserve political control, creating an incentive for them to maintain their alignment with the United States.

Reinforcing that posture are official histories, school textbooks, and orthodox historical works. They are not directly employed to bolster the image of the United States. But they essentially establish and uphold a metanarrative that disciplines thought about state enemies and friendly allies. China, linked to invasions of Southeast Asian kingdoms in the early modern period and communist subversion during the Cold War, is the clear external threat. Conversely, not only are American attempts to topple Southeast Asian governments during the Cold War downplayed, the United States emerged as the rescuer that intervened in the Vietnam War and bought time for the rest of Southeast Asia to develop economically. Even in Vietnam, where the war is associated more with the policies of the Democratic and Republican administrations' hawks rather than the American people, China is depicted in establishment texts as the centuries-old foe that remains a threat to Vietnamese interests. Hamilton-Hart deftly shows that although these historical narratives are contested in the Philippines and Thailand, which have more room for historical revisionism to operate, they function overall to advance the interests of Southeast Asian regimes and their ties with the United States.

Similarly, opinions propounded by diplomats in Southeast Asian foreign ministries and scholars in think-tanks and universities lend additional weight to the belief that Washington has played a positive role in the Asia-Pacific. In a vivid and entrancing study of how career diplomats and establishment figures form that belief, Hamilton-Hart tests her theory against the officials' learning and working environments, their media diet, their personal relations with American policymakers, and the history of U.S. cultural and public diplomacy in that subregion. She finds that all of these experiences and encounters generate and sustain an accepting pro-American bias that when challenged tends to be justified by a recourse to established wisdom rather than careful scrutiny. This is not to say that the bias is held irrationally. Nor can it be said that the Southeast Asians are deluded. But the extant information and social environments do restrict the number of pathways from which alternative views can spring forth to challenge the bias. In the absence of some sort of a defeater of the belief, Southeast Asian elites are likely to continue to entertain the idea that the United States is a benign actor. They are also likely to continue to back the primacy of American power in the region.

The ideas explored in *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions* make it an impressively insightful and thought-provoking study. The book provides a welcomed alternative to thinking about the international relations of the Asia-Pacific. Hamilton-Hart laudably shifts the analysis away from conventional accounts that utilize structural IR theories and balance-of-power logic to

explain the Southeast Asian foreign policy orientation, employing a conceptual schema that makes the book a valuable and creative contribution to the field. She does not cite the works of John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, two distinguished historians who expounded an extraordinarily influential idea about British imperial expansion.¹ But their theories are remarkably similar. American hegemony in Asia, like the expansion of the British Empire, was founded on local collaboration. If the immense impact of Gallagher and Robinson's scholarship on imperial historians is any indication, Hamilton-Hart's study is likely to make an equally powerful impression on scholars of Asia-Pacific international relations.

Backed by an impressive array of published works and personal interviews with Southeast Asian officials and opinion makers, the volume is indeed an excellent work of analysis. It is also peppered with memorable anecdotes that are often informative and sometimes ironic. "Better the devil you know," was one refrain among Southeast Asian officials when asked why they were sympathetic to the United States (127). In addition, there is much to be said about the predictive value and power of the theoretical construct developed in the book. Insofar as Hamilton-Hart is correct in her contention that the sources of Southeast Asian foreign policy are fundamentally domestic rather than external, a fundamental shift in those governments' beliefs about the United States, if it occurs, is more likely to originate from political and socioeconomic change within Southeast Asia rather than shifts in the regional strategic landscape. Watchers of security developments in Asia would do well to be attuned to those developments in Southeast Asia.

While there is much to praise in *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions*, there are some aspects of the book that could have benefited from further discussion and exploration. First, while Hamilton-Hart's overview of the material gains acquired by Southeast Asian states when they aligned with Washington makes for compelling reading, a focused investigation of the extent to which one or two state-linked firms (and those who had run them) directly profited from the relationship would have capped the analysis. It would have provided more depth and color to the book's admittedly broad survey of the material benefits purportedly obtained by the U.S.-aligned Southeast Asian regimes, and make tangible one of the chief claims of the book.

Second, the argument that Southeast Asian beliefs about the United States are the products of interests and illusions can be strengthened by some comparative analysis. Without asking the author to change the scope of the book altogether, a cursory probe into the extent to which the acquisition of comparative benefits (if any) from other, say Western European, states also generated similar Southeast Asian beliefs about the Europeans would have been useful. If Western European investments and trade had also benefited pro-European Southeast Asian regimes materially and politically, does a similar discourse

¹ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson in the "Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review* 6 (1953): 1-15; and Ronald Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration," in *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, ed. E.R.J. Owen and R.B. Sutcliffe (London, 1972): 117-142.

about the indispensability and stabilizing function of the European presence in the region arise as well? If not, and this is not the default argument but a plausible one, perhaps Southeast Asian capabilities, the states' external threat concerns, and the perceived ability of American military power to meet their unease against those security threats are really the more decisive considerations inducing Southeast Asian governments to entertain particular beliefs about Washington—all things being equal.

Third, as someone who has been educated and who teaches international history and international relations in Singapore, I think Hamilton-Hart over-generalizes when she characterizes the university syllabi in that country as “markedly U.S.-friendly” (177). My own interest in the subject was sparked years ago when I was prescribed an article written by Robert J. McMahon during my undergraduate years at the National University of Singapore. McMahon's influential essay, which critiqued the Eisenhower revisionists and documented a series of misplaced American interventions in the so-called Third World, certainly does not lend itself to be a U.S.-friendly piece of scholarship.² As for the graduate courses on Asia-U.S. relations and undergraduate courses on the Cold War in Asia that I offer at Nanyang Technological University, students are exposed to a broad range of literature on the U.S. involvement in Asia. There is a mixture of views in those writings and there are scores that do not qualify as particularly U.S.-friendly. The readings in fact document the myriad destabilizing and disastrous U.S. overt and covert interventions in Southeast Asia since 1945. And questions that are repeatedly asked in my classes are: Would Asia be better off without the United States sticking its nose in the region's affairs? How constructive or unhelpful has the United States been to Asia? What perpetuates American power in the region? What my students eventually take away from the courses is tough to determine, though the class discussions, term papers, and answers to final examination questions do exhibit a serious contemplation of the American role in Asia and whether Washington is indeed a benign actor. With Hamilton-Hart's stimulating volume, my students will now have another excellent source to aid them as they think about those questions. Her characterization of their syllabi will of course be somewhat ironic, but it sure will generate much debate.

Despite the instances where I think Hamilton-Hart could have qualified or developed the discussion in more detail, I am sure that scholars and students will read *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions* with much appreciation. There is a great deal to admire in the book—its persuasive arguments and rich source materials, especially the seventy-four interviews which I hope she will donate to an archive and make them available for others to ponder. The study effectively challenges prevailing views on why Southeast Asian states hold onto their positive beliefs about the United States, offering a compelling case that interests and illusions matter in the international politics of the Asia-Pacific. More importantly, what Hamilton-Hart has admirably done is to show that if scholars are to appreciate the origins and extent of American hegemony in Asia, they need to seriously pay attention to local intermediaries who also perpetuate the hegemony.

² Robert J. McMahon, “Eisenhower and Third World Nationalism: A Critique of the Revisionists,” *Political Science Quarterly* 101 (Fall 1986): 453-473.

Reading Natasha Hamilton-Hart's excellent new book *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions: Southeast Asia and American Power* brought back a flood of memories from the mid-late 1980s, when I enjoyed top-secret security clearance and worked in the U.S. Embassy in Manila and the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the U.S. State Department in Washington, DC. Hamilton-Hart's book reminded me of my bemusement upon learning that the CIA station chief in Manila exchanged Christmas cards with an impressively long list of prominent Filipino politicians, and my response to similar stories from a friend who moved to a post in the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. The book also recalled an occasion one evening in Washington, DC, when I saw former CIA director (and Phoenix Program mastermind) William Colby greeting then Singaporean Ambassador to the United States Tommy Koh with a huge grin, a joyful shout ("Tommy!!!!"), and a tight embrace. Such was the nature of American linkages with the Southeast Asian power elite – warm, intimate, and fully reciprocated in avowed sentiments and sympathies. Such was the 'comfort zone' within which the United States government could operate to protect and promote its interests in the region.

Against this backdrop, it was with considerable satisfaction that I read *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions: Southeast Asia and American Power*, which is really the first book which captures key truths about the nature and extent of U.S. hegemony across Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The book is a very useful – and long overdue – antidote to the abiding focus of International Relations scholars on ASEAN and regionalism in the study of Southeast Asia, a tendency which has long served to systematically obscure the nature and extent of American power in the region. The publication of *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions* is also very timely, as a growing academic literature on Southeast Asian 'hedging' has recently been superseded by a marked trend of Southeast Asian acquiescence in the reassertion of American primacy in the Asia-Pacific region to counter expanding Chinese economic and military power in the region. In this context, Hamilton-Hart's new book does much to expose and explain the very strong underpinnings of American power in Southeast Asia, thus making a major contribution to the literature on the international relations of the region.

Hard Interests, Soft Illusions not only offers a more accurate and illuminating descriptive picture of American power in Southeast Asia than previously available; it also provides an explanatory account of the nature and extent of American hegemony in the region. Here Hamilton-Hart provides a potted post-war history of American relations with Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines which shows how the United States (and its close ally the United Kingdom) helped to secure the position of conservative elites in the face of successive challenges from popular forces mobilized by leftist movements and parties across the region. Her overall point is to demonstrate that the U.S. played a key role in the consolidation of conservative authoritarian regimes and narrowly oligarchical democracies across Southeast Asia, and that it has been the consonance of interests between the U.S. government and various conservative elites – rather than more broadly conceived national interests of the population at large – which has underpinned American

power in the region. The book thus provides not only a damning indictment of American policy in Southeast Asia over the past many decades, but also a withering critique of Southeast Asia foreign policy-makers as well.

Hard Interests, Soft Illusions also suggests two directions for further research and writing on American power in Southeast Asia. First of all, much of the book follows the Gramscian thrust of the so-called 'Italian School' of International Relations in its account of the construction and maintenance of a transnational 'dominant bloc' of social forces and states linking Southeast Asia to the United States, although Hamilton-Hart eschews this kind of language and literature. Here it is worth noting Eva-Lotta Hedman's openly Gramscian account of the American role in successive 'transformist' resolutions to crises of hegemony in the Philippines and recent work by scholars like Bradley Simpson and Inderjeet Parmar on the role of the Ford Foundation in Indonesia.¹ Clearly, as William I. Robinson illustrated in his work on Central America,² there is room for further research and – Gramscian – analysis of the diverse range of forces and institutions linked and mobilized in support of 'dominant blocs' in Southeast Asia, from the Ford Foundation to the Asia Foundation, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Asian American Free Labor Institute, and so forth. In other words, what Hamilton-Hart essentially describes is a form of 'hegemony' in Southeast Asia, which must be understood in terms that extend beyond the realm of inter-state relations and American or Southeast Asian state power, as her own account of history textbooks in various countries in the region suggests.

Second, Hamilton-Hart's potted history of America's role in the making of conservative authoritarianism and oligarchical democracy in Southeast Asia suggests the importance of developing a more fully fleshed out counter-hegemonic historical account for Southeast Asian audiences. Here it is worth noting the advances which recent historical scholarship has made on this front. Dan Fineman has shown how the United States played a key role in the consolidation of military rule in Thailand after the 1947 coup, and a recent SOAS Ph.D. thesis by Pontep Tanakoses has similarly demonstrated the importance of U.S. support for the development of the Royal Thai Police.³ In the Philippines, beyond the aforementioned and other accounts of U.S. intervention in the transitions from Elpidio Quirino to Ramon Magsaysay in 1953 and from Ferdinand Marcos to Corazon Aquino in 1986 (briefly

¹ Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, *In the Name of Civil Society: From Free Election Movements to People Power in the Philippines* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); Bradley R. Simpson, *Economists With Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations 1960-1968* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 124-148.

² William I. Robinson, *Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change, and Globalization* (London: Verso, 2003).

³ Dan Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997); Pontep Tanakoses, "The Rise and Fall of the Thai Police: United States Covert Assistance and Thailand's Domestic Power Struggle, 1950-1957" (Ph.D. Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2011).

mentioned – and somewhat misrepresented – in Hamilton-Hart’s book), there is still much work to be done on the nature and extent of American involvement in counterinsurgency operations and anti-communist vigilante mobilization, especially in the mid-late 1980s (when the CIA station more than doubled in size). Audrey and George Kahin, Bradley Simpson, and John Roosa have provided important revisionist accounts of the American role in the making of conservative authoritarianism in Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s,⁴ and scholars like Matthew Jones have likewise revealed the key role of the American and British governments in the making of Malaysia.⁵ But much more research is needed to understand the role of British Special Branch in the developments which allowed Lee Kuan Yew to wrest control over the People’s Action Party (PAP) from left-wing activists in Singapore in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In conclusion, Natasha Hamilton-Hart’s *Hard Interests, Soft Illusions* provides an important and timely contribution to the study of the international relations of Southeast Asia, a realm of scholarly inquiry which has long been dominated by conservative ‘ASEANologists’ uninterested in exploring – or acknowledging – the nature and extent of American hegemony and the narrowly oligarchical basis of state power (and foreign policy decision-making) in the region. This is a book which deserves to be widely read and discussed. It represents an important step towards a broader effort in what Raymond Williams called the “unlearning of the dominative mode”⁶ in the history of the modern international relations of Southeast Asia.

⁴ Audrey R. Kahin and George McT. Kahin, *Subversion as Foreign Policy: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* (New York: New Press, 1995); Simpson, *Economists With Guns*; John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto’s Coup d’État in Indonesia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

⁵ Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia, 1961-1965: Britain, the United States, and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell* (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), p. 336

Author's Response by Natasha Hamilton-Hart, University of Auckland

Let me start by offering my thanks to John Ciorciari, Joey Long and John Sidel for taking the time and effort to write reviews that are accurate, elegant and insightful, and to Thomas Maddux for organizing the roundtable. I am grateful and humbled to read a set of reviews that reflect such careful, scholarly attention to my book. Although they emphasise different aspects of the book, all the reviews capture the book's argument fairly, and the criticisms and suggestions for extension are very helpful. Many of the criticisms pinpoint concerns that I wrestled with in writing the book, but the reviewers have been able to define them with more force and clarity than I was able to.

One central issue raised by both John Sidel and Joey Long is the debt the book owes to scholarship on hegemony and imperialism, British and American. This debt is not fully acknowledged in the text for two main reasons. First, because I am not as familiar as I should be with some of the works cited by Sidel and Long, I'm glad to have several new items to add to my reading list. Although there are studies I have missed, it was my encounter with what Sidel terms "counter-hegemonic" histories of American involvement in Southeast Asia that provided me with much of the inspiration and material to begin this project. In addition to the meticulous histories by Daniel Fineman, Bradley Simpson, John Roosa, and Audrey and George Kahin that he mentions, I must also note work by Alfred McCoy, Soravis Jayanama, Ben Kiernan, Greg Poulgrain, and T.N. Harper as having been particularly influential in my own intellectual journey.¹

I am in full agreement with Sidel's call for further investigation into several historical episodes in which the U.S. and the U.K. played pivotal but still under-researched roles. I would also underline Long's observation that revisionist national histories written in Southeast Asia are now more plentiful than they once were. These are the histories that serve as crucial counterpoints to what can still, in most countries, be considered the mainstream 'official history' version of the past. The scholars who have produced these counter-histories have done the detailed work in declassified archives, private collections, and oral history repositories that allow people like me to point to some of the biases and inaccuracies in official history. My concern in writing the book was with the way International Relations (IR) as a discipline seemed to hew closely to official history. Albert Lau's account of Singapore's merger with and separation from Malaysia (an account derived from the Lee Kuan Yew wing of the PAP and the officially-espoused positions of the

¹ Alfred McCoy, 'America's Secret War in Laos, 1955-75', in *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. Marilyn Young and Robert Buzzanco, 283-313, Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002 and *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. New York: Owl Books, 2006; S. Jayanama, "'Stacking the Chips": Rethinking the Origins of the Thai-US Special Relationship', in *Santi Pracha Dhamma: Essays in Honour of the Late Puey Ungphakorn*, 220-241, Bangkok: Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute, 2001; Ben Kiernan, 'The Impact on Cambodia of the U.S. Intervention in Vietnam', in *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives*, ed. Jayne Werner and Luu Doan Huynh, 216-229, Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1993; Greg Poulgrain, Greg, *The Genesis of Konfrontasi: Malaysia Brunei Indonesia 1945-65*, Bathurst, NSW: Crawford House Publishing, 1998; T.N. Harper, 'Lim Chin Siong and the "Singapore Story"', in *Comet in Our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History*, ed. Tan Jing Quee and Jomo K.S., 3-55, Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 2001.

British government), for example, is more likely to be cited than any of the revisionist histories that challenge key claims in the official narrative.² While this is changing, these counter-histories simply have not had the visibility or audience commanded by mainstream histories in Southeast Asia.

The second reason for the book's failure to acknowledge a potential debt to scholarship on hegemony – particularly, as Sidel suggests, the Gramscian tradition – was a more deliberate one, although it also reflects my somewhat hazy memory of graduate school exposure to the *Prison Notebooks*.³ I think it is fair to say that the main conclusions of the book are consistent with the argument put forward by Antonio Gramsci about the relationship between beliefs and material power. The book's conclusions are also consistent with some strands of constructivist theorising in IR, which overlap with a rich literature on the role of beliefs in foreign policy. Why not simply present the argument as standing squarely in either the Gramscian or constructivist tradition, rather than making a foray into social and cognitive psychology? One of my reasons for making the foray was an interest in microfoundations. While I could recognize the areas of consonance between the argument I was making and some IR analyses of hegemony, I could not find in these analyses a convincing account of the nuts and bolts of how beliefs are formed and maintained. It seemed to me that if an evidence-based set of theories on belief formation existed it would, almost by necessity, be found in psychology not political science.⁴

The excursion into cognitive and social psychology might be seen as rather self-indulgent, when to many people the basic idea that interests influence beliefs is intuitively plausible and does not need explanation. But mainstream approaches in IR base their predictions on the assumption that some form of probabilistic, evidence-based reasoning prevails in the foreign policy arena. I wanted to make an argument that could stand (or not) on the terms favoured by such rationalist scholarship. The choice of theoretical underpinning also reflects my sense that tribal and political identifications within IR as a discipline sometimes compartmentalize scholarship and can prevent information from traveling. I would like to be proved wrong, but my impression is that labels such as 'critical', 'Gramscian', and 'constructivist' can become tribal identifiers, however much the actual scholarship going under these labels should be perfectly accessible to those outside these traditions.

² Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement*. Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998. Geoff, Wade, "Operation Cold Store": A Key Event in the Creation of Malaysia and in the Origins of Modern Singapore.' Paper Presented at the 21st Conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia, 21-25 June 2010, Singapore.

³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971.

⁴ I am, of course, far from being the first to turn to psychology in this way. Political psychology is a thriving sub-discipline of political science and, although there are many leaders in the field, I would like to single out the career-long work of Robert Jervis as particularly inspirational. For a succinct taste of his thinking on beliefs see his 'Understanding Beliefs', *Political Psychology* 27 (5): 641-663, 2006.

There remains the fundamentally important question raised by John Ciorciari: to what extent do the cognitive constructs that the book calls “illusions” actually drive foreign policy? I think that he is correct in claiming that focusing on interests alone would offer a fairly powerful prediction of alignment behaviour (although we may differ as to how sectional those interests are). He suggests that beliefs could therefore be relegated to the secondary issue of how a foreign policy apparatus defends its policy choices. Although I admit to being tempted to cut out cognitive constructs as being epiphenomenal, in the end I find that to do so fails an important empirical test: is it plausible that the people who inhabit foreign policy organizations could do what they do to keep the bureaucratic machine running if they did not hold “illusory” supportive beliefs? I do not think it is plausible. A crudely interest-based argument (when understood as sectional interests rather than encompassing national interests) simply does not fit with the self-understanding of actors inside the foreign policy apparatus. While “pragmatism” is a point of pride among many in the foreign policy community, the degree of self-conscious cynicism and duplicity (or worse) that a crude interest-based argument implies does not fit the evidence that we have about their motivations and self-understanding. If the supporting beliefs fail to hold sway, something has to give: either the individual or the foreign policy.

How much this matters in practice probably depends on how one answers another important question raised by Ciorciari and Long: are the interests driving foreign policy alignment really so domestic and sectional? There is a case to be made that sometimes external factors – regional rivalries, threatening foreign powers, or perhaps the offer of foreign aid – present either a threat or an opportunity that is not, as Ciorciari puts it, “a narrowly partisan domestic regime interest.” What if China, for example, really is a revisionist power whose unchecked rise threatens not just incumbent elites but broad swathes of the population? Certainly, it is hard to find a significant domestic constituency in any Southeast Asian country that would welcome an escalation of disputes in the South China Sea. Government actors do sometimes defend something that, for want of a better term, could be called the national interest. However, their pursuit of such interests will probably also reflect the kind of national order they wish to preserve – or, in the case of revolutionary regimes, bring about. More to the point in the case of the countries and regimes discussed in the book, my assessment of the external threats they have faced is that they were rarely of the sort that could be divorced from their implications for particular domestic contenders for power. At least in the case of the big, defining threats that have etched themselves into the foreign policy community’s worldview, narratives and lessons learnt reflect identifiable biasing filters.

I do not want to suggest that no-one in the foreign policy community recognizes that the received wisdom circulating in their professional sphere is to some extent a simplification. Several of my interviewees were conscious of an expedient ‘sharpening and levelling’ of the empirical record. And a number had been exposed to competing historical narratives that prompted critical interrogation of some foundational beliefs. Among the diplomats and others whom I interviewed for this book few had been exposed to competing narratives as part of their formal education, but I recognize that this is changing – as a result of the pluralism introduced into the curriculum by scholars such as Joey Long. The assertion that

the syllabus tends to be U.S.-friendly does not fit the courses Long describes himself as teaching (just as it does not fit the courses I taught over ten years at the National University of Singapore). It was based on a survey of IR courses conducted by Southeast Asian academics and reflects their interpretation of the reading materials and selection of topics in a typical course. Taken together with my own (haphazard) collection of syllabi, I would still say that the U.S.-friendly judgement stands as an approximation, if only because of the extent to which ASEAN has come to dominate teaching and writing on the international relations of Southeast Asia. This focus, as Sidel notes, serves to “systematically obscure the nature and extent of American power in the region.”

More comprehensive studies might paint a different picture of perceptions in Southeast Asian foreign policy communities. As Ciorciari observes, there is likely to be a degree of selection bias in this study because my sample of interviewees was far from random. With the exception of a few interviews conducted through an interpreter in Vietnam, all were from the English-speaking section of their country’s foreign policy community. Written sources included articles and memoirs in Indonesian and Malay, but there is an important gap with respect to materials in other languages. I made an effort to go beyond the ASEAN-ISIS circuit, but it is nonetheless probable that members of the foreign policy community who have followed quite different educational and social paths to professional advancement – an education in China or Egypt, for example, followed by career specialization in Arabic or other non English-speaking postings – are underrepresented in my sample. I did make a point of trying to gain second-hand information on such people, to try to determine how significant a section of the foreign ministry they might constitute. My impression is that English speakers, many at least partly educated in the U.S. or other English-speaking western countries, predominate in all of the countries studied except for Vietnam. As Ciorciari points out, English is the *lingua franca* of regional diplomacy and members of the foreign policy community have a professional interest in learning it. I don’t discount the likelihood that views are more heterogeneous than the book presents them as being, but there seems quite a lot of evidence of selection filters operating in the foreign ministries of the region.

I hope the book shows that this matters, that interest and “illusions” help explain why no other external power operates in a “comfort zone”, to use Sidel’s term, comparable to that enjoyed by the U.S. in Southeast Asia. Diplomats from China, Russia or elsewhere no doubt maintain individual relationships with as much interpersonal warmth and intimacy, but collectively such ties do not appear anywhere near as pervasive or penetrative as those maintained by Americans.

I should add a final caveat. The book is deliberately Southeast Asia-centric. It draws attention to the Southeast Asian players, practices and institutions that sustain the peculiar access enjoyed by the U.S. in the region. This focus means that the book suffers from the limits to transparency that are pervasive across the region: relatively few personal memoirs, no declassified archives, and no freedom of information requests to government agencies. I hope that the book will be followed by others that are able to draw on better methods for carrying out research in such contexts.

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