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Ang Cheng Guan. *The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization*. Routledge, 2022. ISBN 9781032009261

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Introduction by Harish C. Mehta, Independent Scholar

Ang Cheng Guan demonstrates the craft of a historian in his newest book, *The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization,* balancing meticulousness and concision, and easily surpassing at least three scholarly benchmarks. First, his study of this eight-country regional defence alliance, consisting of Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, Britain, and the United States, which was created in 1954 as a response to Chinese Communist expansion and dissolved in 1977, is timely as the region is witnessing the emergence of a regional security forum, the Quad, grouping Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. Second, the book fills a large gap in the literature that has existed since the end of the Cold War. The very name, SEATO, had all but faded from public memory, leaving faint impressions of its role as an anti-Communist front. Third, in his telling of the SEATO story, Ang uses a wider range of sources, especially primary ones, compared to the books by other scholars, mainly political scientists who had access to contemporary sources.[1] For example, a recent book by the historian, Damien Fenton, released in 2012, is presented as a military history, whereas Ang's book is wider in scope and uses a broader range of archival sources.[2]

During its life the alliance received dire diagnoses from its own principal political actors, as well as from scholars. To many, it was a Cold War *laksa* of epithets such as "impotent," "anachronistic," and "disunited"—of which "disunity" was arguably the most calamitous, and should serve as a lesson to other regional alliances.[3] Little wonder that the worried Thai Foreign Minister, Thanat Khoman, made a suggestion to reinvigorate the organization at a meeting in May 1969, and make changes that were necessary to "save SEATO from impotency."[4] The previous year, a scholar had argued that "SEATO had an inbuilt impotence" in terms of its strategy.[5] In his review in the pages below, Iain Henry argues that the single event demonstrating SEATO's disunity was the Laos crisis which "most vividly illustrated its impotency." And Ang observes that by 1969, the Central Intelligence Agency labeled SEATO as an "anachronism, designed against unlikely threats, filled with unenthusiastic members" (114).

The co-existence of anomalies, both structural and strategic, had led to organizational disunity. Its Bangkok headquarters were managed by senior Asian officials although SEATO was a Western creation. Its staff did the bidding of their own countries, to whom they were loyal, and to a lesser extent to SEATO. Its members thus pulled in different directions, driven by their national agendas.

There was also the problem of power imbalance between the great powers, United States and Britain and the others, two smaller Southeast Asian states. There were more odd ingredients in the *laksa*: "two sleeping partners," a reference to France and Pakistan that did little (141); the organization was "a moribund strategic basketcase," and "a paper tiger."[6] Its strategic role was boxed in, as that of a bystander outside the mainstream of

[1] For example, Leszek Buszynski, SEATO: The Failure of an Alliance Strategy (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983); and George Modelski, ed., SEATO: Six Studies (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1962).

[2] Damien Fenton, *To Cage the Red Dragon: SEATO and the Defence of Southeast Asia, 1955-1965* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

[3] Leszek Buszynski, "SEATO: Why it Survived until 1977 and Why it was Abolished," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,* Vol 12, no. 2 (Sept. 1981): 288.

[4] Buszynski, "SEATO: Why it Survived until 1977 and Why it was Abolished," 288.

[5] Robert C. Nairn, "SEATO: A Critique," *Pacific Affairs,* Vol. 41, no. 1 (Spring 1968): 5-18.

[6] Justus M. van der Kroef, *The Lives of SEATO* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 1976), 1-39.

Asian grand strategy. It lacked the heft or the gumption to conduct dialogue with its adversaries.[7] All of this did not augur well within the region it sought to protect.

In his book, Ang does not offer a polemic on whether SEATO failed, instead writing a comprehensive account that remains nuanced in emphasizing the need to focus on the overall context. Still, its closure in 1977 carried a whiff of failure, of not keeping up with the times, and obsolescence. Were there any successes? The fact that it managed to survive at all must rank as one of them.

A principal cause for SEATO's structural lopsided-ness was its unattractiveness to the many Asian countries that declined membership. India and Indonesia stayed out because of their non-alignment, wishing to avoid any alliance that represented the reimposition of Western hegemony over the region's newly independent states. From the perspective of the recalcitrant states, SEATO was an effort to disrupt their own developmental trajectories, and it marked an interference in their own regional strategies.[8] They were deeply mistrustful of its potential to influence their individual societies.

Arguing somewhat differently in his review, Andrea Benvenuti believes that India's opposition to SEATO "was based on a gross and, in part, even deliberate misunderstanding of American—and more broadly Western—motives in Southeast Asia (as well as of China's revisionist and revolutionary aims)." Benvenuti, however, concurs that India had no intention of getting drawn down the same Cold War road that was fraught with the risk of a return of imperial colonization in some form.

Was India alone in voicing such reservations? The record shows otherwise. Some of the most influential countries of Southeast Asia were chary of the arrival of SEATO. Sukarno's Indonesia had shown no intention of joining the alliance despite his growing friendliness with the West.[9] In choosing to stay out, India and Indonesia had obviously consulted on their non-alignment as their bilateral relations were experiencing a period of extreme cordiality.[10] Malaysia's leaders "dared not" hazard forging formal ties with the Western bloc—even though SEATO aimed to contain communism—because Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman had seen that the alliance was unpopular with India and Indonesia, the two Asian giants to whom Kuala Lumpur deferred.[11] Moreover, as Ang demonstrates, Malaysia's dominant political formation, the United Malays National Organisation, as well as local opposition parties, and smaller Chinese and Tamil groups also opposed SEATO (49-50). Benvenuti makes an important point about the inner motives of Britain and France that "never intended" to allocate proper resources for regional defence under SEATO, with Ang clarifying that these two European powers used their participation in a calculated effort to restrain American policy.

Iain Henry draws attention to the "glue" that bound the alliance, and to Ang's thesis that the various members had their own reasons for joining. For Britain, membership was "the price" it paid for the United States' acceptance of the outcome of the Geneva Conference in 1954, and thereby lowering the risk of a new war (28). The Philippines and Thailand viewed their membership as a source of deterrence and defense support if the

[7] Nairn, "SEATO: A Critique."

[8] Nairn, "SEATO: A Critique."

[9] John Griffin, "Khrush Lends Indonesia $250 million, Sukarno Promises Stay Neutral," *The Florence Times* (Alabama), February 29, 1960.

[10] L.P. Singh, "Dynamics of Indian-Indonesian Relations," *Asian Survey,* Vol. 7, no.9 (Sept. 1967): 655-666.

[11] Johan Sarvavanamuttu, "Malaysian Foreign Policy and the Five Power Defence Arrangements," in *Five Power Defence Arrangements at Forty,* ed. Ian Storey, Ralf Emmers, and Daljit Singh (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2011), 39.

Communist guerrilla movements in neighboring countries prevailed. Pakistan expected that through SEATO it might receive U.S. aid on the lines of the assistance Washington had earlier provided to Turkey and Greece under the Marshall Plan.

The timeliness of Ang's book should make it essential reading for scholars seeking to draw lessons from the of regional alliances. Admittedly, SEATO and the Quad are very different: the former aimed to combat Chinese communist expansion, and the latter attempts to ensure that Beijing respects 'freedom of navigation' in the Indo-Pacific region, and that its worrisome financial hegemony does not damage regional countries. In this context, Henry raises a hypothetical scenario that if China attempted to conquer territory in Asia, beyond Taiwan, then the Quad would probably evolve into a cohesive and effective multilateral alliance. Ang's book has relevance because not many analyses of the Quad have taken the historical perspective into account. With a finger on the pulse of the region, reviewer Hoang Minh Vu upholds Ang's book for sounding a note of caution for present-day policymakers against repeating the mistake of trying to force countries in the Asia-Pacific to pick sides, as most of them value their independence, and would prefer non-alignment.

In a compliment to Ang, Hoang finds much that was new to him as a reviewer (as it was to me because SEATO had virtually disappeared from our lives), including the fact that SEATO was first pitched to the Colombo powers (India, Indonesia, Ceylon, Burma, and Pakistan). In comparing SEATO with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Hoang recalls that while SEATO's provisions for collective defence against external attacks were weaker than NATO's, its clause for dealing with domestic communist subversion was quite extensive and included provisions for economic cooperation (Ang, 52-5).

It is illuminating to revisit the perspective of the United States—the principal actor within SEATO—that the alliance "worked hard" in various ways. It tried to "strengthen the economic foundations and living standards of the Southeast Asian States," it sponsored meetings and exhibitions on cultural, religious and historical topics, and along with its non-Asian member states it sponsored fellowships for Southeast Asian scholars.[12] All of these were good things, but did the region really need SEATO for such activities that could easily have been performed by Western embassies?

Ang explains that the decision to shut down SEATO meant that it had served its purpose in a changing world, and that organizations that would not, or could not, keep up with the times became irrelevant. Within Asia, SEATO surely was not the only regional forum to end up badly. It is often said that the ASEAN Regional Forum, Southeast Asia's premier organization for security dialogue with twenty-seven member states seems like a gathering of talking heads whose interests are often unmanageable, has not accomplished much, yet it continues to exist. In the end, a 'talk shop' is much better than the absence of dialogue.

Participants:

Ang Cheng Guan is presently Associate Dean, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). His most recent publications are *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018) and its sequel, *Southeast Asia after the Cold War: A Contemporary History* (Singapore: NUS Press,

[12] "Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), 1954," U.S. Department of State, https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/88315.htm.

2019) as well as *The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation* (London: Routledge, 2022). He has two books forthcoming in 2023: *Reassessing Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought*, and *The Evolution of Singapore's Grand Strategy*. He is currently working on a book project: *An International History of the Third Indochina War*.

Harish C. Mehta has taught History at McMaster University, University of Toronto, and Trent University. His most recent book is *People's Diplomacy of Vietnam: Soft Power in the Resistance War, 1965-1972* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing Limited, 2022). He is currently co-editing a volume on world literature, entitled "Michael Ondaatje's Globe of Fear" (Routledge). His articles on Vietnamese diplomacy have appeared in *International History Review, Diplomatic History, Peace and Change, The Historian, and History Compass,* and his review articles have appeared in H-Diplo.

Andrea Benvenuti is an Associate Professor in international relations at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. He has just published a multi-authored book on *China's Foreign Policy: The Emergence of a Great Power* (Routledge 2022). He is currently completing a multi-authored two-volume book examining the impact of Western power on the shaping of the Asian regional system from 1919 to 1989 (Bloomsbury), and a single-authored book dealing with India's role in convening the 1955 Bandung Conference (Hurst).

Iain D. Henry is a Senior Lecturer at the Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre. He is the author of *Reliability and Alliance Interdependence: The United States and Its Allies in Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

Hoang Minh Vu is a diplomatic historian of 20th century Vietnam and the Asia-Pacific. His Ph.D. dissertation at Cornell University argued that the Third Indochina War is the key formative event of the present-day regional order in Southeast Asia, most notably by elevating the principle of non-interference above the protection of human rights. His work has appeared in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, various edited volumes, and the documentary *The People vs. Agent Orange* (2020).

Review by Andrea Benvenuti, University of New South Wales

On 30 July 1954, British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden informed Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru that Britain and the United States (US) were ready to establish "a broadly based defensive organization in South-East Asia and the South-West Pacific." In seeking India's support for such a project—or at least, its benevolent acquiescence—Eden argued that India's participation "would do much to determine the nature and policies of the projected organisation." Believing that India ought to "play a leading role in the defence of South-East Asia", Eden hoped that New Delhi would join a meeting of the representatives of the interested countries in early September in Manila.[13]

Alas, this was not to be. In a lengthy reply dispatched to Eden two days later, Nehru unceremoniously shut the door to India's participation in the emerging Southeast Asian defence alliance. Despite his polite tone, he told Eden that India wanted no part in it. Not only would India's participation go against its non-alignment, it would also help, as Nehru put it, "to extend the area of the cold war with its attendant progressive armed preparedness and the psychosis of hatred and suspicion in this part of the world." In any case, Nehru claimed, "the majority of Asian countries [and the] overwhelming majority of Asian peoples will not be participants in the organisation." In his view, the only way to secure regional stability was for countries to practice the five principles of peaceful co-existence that India and China had recently embraced and that Burma and Indonesia also supported.[14]

Indian remonstrations did not end there. In the lead-up to the Manila Conference, which laid the foundations of the Southeast Treaty Organisation (SEATO), Nehru complained to the British that by adopting the collective defence approach, London was "throwing away [a] golden opportunity of building on [the] goodwill created by [the] Geneva Conference." He said that China had "no aggressive intentions" and would "let her neighbours alone" unless the West "interfer[ed] and provoke[d] her." If the US and its allies could give Beijing "a chance to show her good faith," they would "carry all Asian opinion" with them and "obtain a far more effective degree of security."[15] When his pleas were ignored, Nehru did much to undercut SEATO in the following months.[16] In late 1954, he seized upon an Indonesian proposal for an Afro-Asian gathering to push his grand vision of regional security based on close Sino-Indian cooperation, non-alignment and the five principles of peaceful co-existence.[17] In Nehru's mind, the April 1955 Bandung Conference was intended to promote non-alignment across Asia as an alternative to SEATO and the cold-war logic that it embodied. The Indian press and public opinion were even less restrained than Nehru in their criticism of SEATO. Most Indians wholeheartedly subscribed to the characterisation of American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the alliance's leading proponent, as a "ruthless" and menacing "pactomaniac."[18]

[13] National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew [henceforth NAUK], FO 371/111875, D1704/302 (A), Commonwealth Relations Office [henceforth CRO] to British High Commission [henceforth BHC] New Delhi, telegram Y 335, 30 July 1954.

[14] NAUK, PREM 11/651, BHC New Delhi to CRO, telegram 739, 2 August 1954.

[15] NAUK, PREM 11/651, BHC New Delhi to CRO, telegram 798, 16 August 1954.

[16] Andrea Benvenuti, "Constructing Peaceful Coexistence: Nehru's Approach to Regional Security and India's Rapprochement with Communist China in the mid-1950s," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 31:1 (2020), 91-117.

[17] Andrea Benvenuti, "Nehru's Bandung Moment: India and the Convening of the 1955 Asian-African Conference," *India Review* (2022), forthcoming.

[18] Roger Dingman, "John Foster Dulles and the Creation of the South-East Asia Treaty Organization in 1954", *International History Review*, 11: 3 (1989), 457.

Indian opposition to SEATO, however, was based on a gross and, in part, even deliberate misunderstanding of American—and more broadly Western—motives in Southeast Asia (as well as of China's revisionist and revolutionary aims). As Ang Cheng Guan well explains in his carefully researched monograph, the "real" SEATO never quite matched up with the "imaginary" SEATO of India's political lore. Far from being an aggressive manifestation of America's containment of Communism in Southeast Asia, the "real" SEATO was a much more modest and less sinister endeavour than many in India (and in Asia) cared to admit at the time. As Ang Cheng Guan's *The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation* shows, SEATO was never intended to provide a platform (or a mechanism) to facilitate Western military intervention in Southeast Asia (34). Nor was it "modelled on NATO" or "envisaged to be an Asian version of NATO" (139). Instead, it was an exercise in careful and calculated deterrence: by declaring their unity of intent in opposing Communist expansion, its seven founding members (the US, Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines and Pakistan) hoped that their show of resolution would make military intervention redundant (34). As Dulles himself had made it clear in July 1954, the key aims of the proposed Southeast Asian defence pact were "to deter open aggression by the Chinese Communists" and "combat subversion and infiltration in the non-Communist states of the area." According to the American Secretary of State, those aims could be achieved principally by "helping to build up local security forces, by economic support, and possibly by underground intelligence support." For him, the key advantages of the proposed defence alliance were two-fold: to grant the President discretionary authority to use force in the event of overt Chinese aggression in Southeast Asia and to secure "the support of other nations in any action we are forced to take." In drafting the treaty, Dulles argued, the United States should not "lead the other signatories to expect large amounts of US military assistance to build up their armed forces nor should it require the stationing of large US and other forces in the area." Lastly, Dulles did not envisage the need "for a large NATO-type organization in the area."[19]

Indeed, as Ang Cheng Guan clearly shows, SEATO resulted from difficult political compromises and often diverging interests among its members. These diverging interests not only manifested themselves in the early years of the organisation but became more visible during the 1960s. While countries like Australia and Thailand were keen to turn SEATO into a viable defence organisation with some teeth for fear of Chinese expansionism, others did not. Preoccupied with imperial retrenchment and reluctant to get involved in regional crises, Britain and France never intended to provide adequate resources for regional defence. Far from supporting a robust containment strategy, their participation in SEATO was a calculated effort to restrain American policy in Asia, as Ang Cheng Guan wisely reminds us. As for Pakistan, its vital interest in SEATO was never the containment of Communism in Asia, but the balancing of India—a goal never shared by the other SEATO members. As a result, during the 1960s, Pakistani policy moved away from its Western moorings towards an *entente cordiale* with Communist China. Its participation in SEATO became increasingly irrelevant. As for the US, when, between the late 1950s and early 1960s, the possibility of calling upon SEATO to manage the Laotian and Vietnam crises arose, Washington either chose to rely on multilateral diplomacy (the Geneva conference on Laos) or go alone, (Vietnam) notwithstanding its attempts to justify the intervention because of SEATO obligations (139). As Ang Cheng Guan correctly points out, multiple factors drove American policy towards Laos and Vietnam. Yet, there is no gainsaying that one such reason was Washington's limited confidence in allied support.

Based on declassified American, British and Australian government files, Ang Cheng Guan's *The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation* offers important and valuable insights on the rise, decline, and demise of SEATO as a cold-war regional alliance. It also brings into focus the different interests, calculations and aspirations of its members.

[19] Minutes of a meeting on Southeast Asia, 24 July 1954 in *FRUS, 1952-54, East Asia and the Pacific, volume XII, part 2* (Washington, DC: US GPO, 1984), 665-672.

In this context, this reviewer found the book's central chapters—those, that is, on the alliance's formative years, the Laotian crisis and the war in Vietnam—particularly instructive and revealing. In brief, *The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation* not only fills an important gap in the existing and somewhat limited literature on SEATO.[20] It is also a much-welcome addition to the large body of works on the cold war in Asia.[21] As such, it deserves to be read by international historians as well as IR scholars working on alliance formation and alliance politics. Despite a few minor typographical errors, the book is clearly and lucidly written, thus making it a go-to reference on SEATO.

It would have been welcome if Ang Cheng Guan had perhaps devoted more time examining how SEATO members sought to build this organisation from scratch, but this was possibly beyond the book's scope. In any case, this should not detract from its unquestionable merits and significance. At a time when a bamboo curtain appears, once again, to be descending on the Asia-Pacific and the United States steps up diplomatic efforts to contain an increasingly assertive China, speculations that the Quad or Quad Plus might evolve into "a new SEATO or an 'Asian NATO'" are not infrequent (142). Yet, as Ang Cheng Guan reminds us, "the history of SEATO", with "its twists and turns," has "never been more relevant today," thus providing a timely cautionary tale about the effectiveness of putative US-led regional alliances to contain China (142).

[20] Leszek Buszynski, *SEATO: The Failure of an Alliance Strategy* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983); Demien Fenton, *To Cage the Red Dragon: SEATO and the Defence of Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012); George Modelski, ed., *SEATO: Six Studies* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1962).

[21] For some of the recent studies in this area see, for instance, Cheng Guan Ang, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretative History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018); Lorenz M. Lüthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Gregg Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry during the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Robert J. McMahon, ed., *The Cold War in the Third World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Review by Iain D. Henry, the Australian National University

Ang Cheng Guan concludes his new book, *The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization*, with the note that "the history of SEATO…more than 60 years since its formation and 40 odd years after its demise…has never been more relevant today" (142). When advocates of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue say it "represents the best hope for building a successful balancing coalition" in Asia, it behooves us to look closely at the historical record to determine why similar organizations have either failed to form, or function successfully, in the past.[22] Drawing on archival sources that were unavailable to earlier researchers, Ang Cheng Guan's history of SEATO significantly extends our understanding of how the alliance organization came to be, why it formed *when* it did, and why it was beset by internal divisions which arguably guaranteed its eventual dissolution.

The book opens with a comprehensive literature review of the existing scholarship on SEATO and the Southeast Asian Collective Defense Treaty, or Manila Pact, which underpins it. This review is an immensely useful resource for any scholar of Southeast Asian regionalism, alliance politics, the First Indochina War, and the early Cold War in Asia. Ang then carefully sets the regional, global, and organizational context for SEATO's formation in 1954. He shows that SEATO cannot be properly understood if it is not considered in context: it came after earlier attempts, largely driven by the Republics of China and Korea, to form a multilateral Pacific Pact in the late 1940s, and amid the creation of a predominantly bilateral alliance system in Asia between 1951 and 1954.

As Ang explains, the formation of SEATO came several months after the United States unsuccessfully attempted to form a military coalition to intervene in Indochina, with the purpose of preventing the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. It may seem odd that the states that were unwilling to intervene in Indochina in May 1954 were willing, only four months later, to enter into a multilateral alliance with not dissimilar aims.[23] Ang's analysis of this apparent puzzle is crucial to his subsequent exploration of the divergent perspectives which later prevented collective SEATO action in Laos. Though one strand of alliance theory expects shared threat perceptions to be the glue that coheres an alliance together, Ang shows that states had a wide variety of motivations for joining SEATO.[24] For the UK, membership was "the price" it paid for the United States' acceptance of the Geneva Conference outcomes, and thus a reduced risk of war in 1954 (28). For Thailand, membership in SEATO offered the prospect of deterrence and defense support if the Communist guerrilla movements in neighboring countries prevailed. Pakistan hoped that through SEATO, it might receive the same kind of assistance the US had earlier provided, under the Marshall Plan, to Turkey and Greece.

These divergent motivations created problems—both short and long-term—for the alliance. Just over one week before the Manila Pact was signed, the US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles bitterly complained that "the French and the British are blocking everything we want to do" (33). Dulles wanted the treaty text to directly imply that Chinese Communist threat was the reason for SEATO's formation, but in the end Washington had to settle for proclaiming a US "understanding" that Article IV, paragraph 1 of the treaty applied only to

[22] Dhruva Jaishankar and Tanvi Madan, "How the Quad Can Match the Hype," *Foreign Affairs*, April 15, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-15/how-quad-can-match-hype

[23] For recent scholarship exploring this issue, see Lloyd Rhodes, *From Hesitation to Commitment: The Failure of United Action and the Formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization*, Bachelor of International Security Studies (Honours) Thesis, Australian National University, 2021.

[24] On the role of shared threat perceptions in alliance formation, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

"Communist aggression" (148). Ang shows that the Manila Pact was a "compromised treaty:" the divergent interests of each member state meant that SEATO was, in the words of Roger Dingman, "deterrent diplomacy" (33, 34).[25] SEATO was not "a mechanism to facilitate military intervention in Indochina, but rather a symbol of anti-communist unity which would make such action unnecessary" (34).

Though the agreement reached at Geneva prohibited Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam from joining military alliances, a protocol to the Manila Pact provided these three "protocol states" with a SEATO security guarantee. As a Communist insurgency developed in Laos, this commitment came to expose the divergent interests which ultimately prevented collective SEATO action in Southeast Asia. As Ang explains, the US promised Laos that "SEATO would help in the event of an emergency. However, he was contradicted by the French and British" (44). At the core of such disagreements was Dulles's deep and implacable disdain for the concept of neutrality: in October 1955, he proclaimed neutralism to be "immoral and shortsighted," whereas British and French leaders regarded neutrality as an acceptable outcome.[26] Neutralism was, in British eyes, "the optimum to be expected from uncommitted Asian countries" (52).

When the civil war in Laos escalated, these divergent views could no longer be concealed or managed without alliance discord. The US was worried that if SEATO did not intervene in Laos then "its prestige 'would be dangerously and possibly fatally undermined'" (69). But the US Ambassador in Bangkok, where SEATO's Secretariat was headquartered, reported that collective action would be hampered by SEATO's "basic problems" of "geographical distribution and varying interests of Asian members…[and the] fundamentally different interests of France, and to a lesser extent UK" (76). The situation might have been different if Laos (or later Vietnam) had been threatened by outright armed attack – conventional war conducted by Communist China's armed forces. But the external support China provided for indigenous insurgencies within Southeast Asia was insufficient to compel collection SEATO action. As such, the US gradually came to see SEATO as "a means whereby restraint is imposed on us by our allies" (80). As SEATO's inaction led to increased anxiety in Bangkok, the US eventually announced its interpretation that Manila Pact obligations were individual as well as collective: the US Secretary of State and Thai Foreign Minister negotiated and published the Thanat-Rusk Communiqué, a diplomatic announcement which confirmed the existence of a bilateral security obligation between Thailand and the United States.[27]

Guan describes how similar disagreements pervaded SEATO throughout the Vietnam War, but it was SEATO's disunity during the Laos crisis which most vividly illustrated its impotency. By 1969, the CIA described SEATO as an "anachronism, designed against unlikely threats, filled with unenthusiastic members" (114). It is thus unsurprising that as the Vietnam War wound down, and as the US-China rapprochement developed, member-states decided to disband the alliance organization. In order to preserve the US-Thai relationship the Manila Pact itself was left intact, and this led Dr Morton Halperin to observe, in 1974, that "for all intents and purposes, SEATO is now a bilateral pact providing an American guarantee of Thai security" (129). Though a cursory

[25] Roger Dingman, "John Foster Dulles and the Creation of the South-East Asia Treaty Organization in 1954," *The International History Review*, Vol XI, No 3, 1989: 457-477.

[26] "Dulles Formulated and Conducted U.S. Foreign Policy for More Than Six Years," *The New York Times*, May 25, 1959.

[27] For more on how SEATO's inaction in Laos affected the US-Thai relationship, see Iain D. Henry, *Reliability and Alliance Interdependence: The United States and Its Allies in Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2022), pp.178-185.

examination might suggest that the alliance dissolved as perceptions of Chinese Communist threat diminished, Ang's book shows us that SEATO was largely a lifeless corpse long before its official end in 1976.

How might the history of SEATO be relevant for understanding Asian security today? SEATO never had to confront a Communist Chinese attempt to conquer one of its neighbors through armed attack. Against this kind of threat alliance unity may have been achieved, but in the absence of such clear-cut aggression SEATO's member states did not have sufficiently convergent interests to enable effective and united responses in Laos, or Vietnam. SEATO's emphasis on military matters—and its close association with the fervently anti-Communist Dulles—meant that many non-aligned states chose not to join or associate with the Organization. Similar dynamics may, debatably, be observed in the contemporary Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. If China today attempted to conquer territory in Asia, beyond Taiwan, then the Quad would probably evolve into a cohesive and effective multilateral alliance. But if the challenges posed by China's rise are of a different nature, and perceptions of the Quad as an anti-China coalition deter other regional states from cooperating with its non-military endeavors, it would be unsurprising to again see divergent interests prevent united action in Asia. SEATO's past is not necessarily the Quad's future—much will depend on China's behavior, the reaction of non-Quad states in Asia, and the Quad's ability to reconcile its incipient balancing coalition potential with its desire to assume a more innocuous role in upholding elements of the existing order—but the SEATO case study does highlight some intriguing parallels.

Today, few analyses of the Quad give adequate thought to the significant historical precedents in Asia. This is partly attributable to the dearth of research on alliances during the early years of the Cold War in Asia: though some great scholarship exists, much of this was completed when far fewer archival documents were available.[28] Ang Cheng Guan's fine book addresses this gap for SEATO: it sheds significant light on past events, while providing the data necessary to illuminate present circumstances and inform thinking on future challenges. This book is—and will remain in the years ahead—an essential resource for scholars and practitioners of Asian security.

[28] Other works on SEATO include Damien Fenton, *To Cage the Red Dragon: SEATO and the Defence of Southeast Asia 1955-1965* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), George Modelski (ed.), *SEATO: Six Studies* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1962), and Leszek Buszynski, *SEATO: The Failure of an Alliance Strategy* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983).

Review by Hoang Minh Vu, Fulbright University Vietnam

The outbreak of the Ukraine-Russia War in February 2022 brought renewed global attention to the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), even as the rise of China has prompted the United States, Australia, India, and Japan to reconvene their regular Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD). There will undoubtedly be an uptick in scholarship on security regimes in the coming years. The timely publication of Ang Cheng Guan's *The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation* well positions it to become a must-read text not only for Southeast Asia specialists and Cold War diplomatic historians, but also the wider community of policy makers and the concerned public.

For a long time, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO or Manila Pact) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO or Baghdad Pact) have been bywords for failure, and little serious scholarship has been done on these two organizations compared to their much more famous cousin, NATO.[29] In fact, there has not been any academic monograph dedicated to SEATO since the end of the Cold War, despite the great expansion in historical scholarship and increased availability of archival materials since – as Ang Cheng Guan's own very comprehensive literature review highlights (8). My own ongoing research into the Interim Mekong Committee, which is also commonly dismissed out-of-hand as a dark time in sub-regional cooperation, makes me particularly sympathetic to Ang's efforts to treat SEATO seriously and understand it holistically. I am strongly in agreement that, regardless of one's assessment of SEATO's success or lack thereof, studying its life cycle can yield much valuable and partially generalizable insights about the workings of security regimes, particularly the dynamics that drive their expansion and decline.

The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation is vintage Ang Cheng Guan, the work of a master historian who has developed a writing style defined by density, concision, and fairness.[30] It is a classic diplomatic history, based on very thorough secondary literature research as well as multi-country archival research. Ang's study is particularly reliant on the English-language government archives of the United States, Britain, and Australia for its primary sources. This reflects both the outsized influence of the United States as the principal power behind SEATO, as well as the much greater degree of openness and accessibility of diplomatic materials from these archives compared to those of other SEATO members and other interested parties. Thus, there is an unavoidable and justifiable US-centrism to the narrative. Meanwhile, Ang has also made special efforts at trying to understand the diverse interests and perspectives of all the players, even those whose national archives remain highly restricted to researchers. He does so by painstakingly hunting for English publications from scholars who study these countries, including many unpublished MA and Ph.D. dissertations. I was particularly impressed by the extensive coverage throughout the book of the viewpoint of perhaps the most marginalized SEATO member, Pakistan. Indeed, Ang uses secondary sources to convincingly argue that Pakistan's interactions with SEATO were

[29] Behçet Kemal Yeşilbursa, "CENTO: The Forgotten Alliance in the Middle East (1959-1979)," *Middle Eastern Studies* 56, no. 6 (November 1, 2020): 854–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2020.1755841 Gives a lot of examples of research citing SEATO and CENTO as failures; Pierre Journoud, "From SEATO to the peace accord on Cambodia: France, Great Britain and collective security in Southeast Asia during the Cold War," *Relations internationales* 168, no. 4 (2016): 29–46; Kevin Ruane, "SEATO, MEDO, and the Baghdad Pact: Anthony Eden, British Foreign Policy and the Collective Defense of Southeast Asia and the Middle East, 1952–1955," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 16, no. 1 (March 9, 2005): 169–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592290590916185.

[30] Cheng Guan Ang, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018); Ang, *Southeast Asia after the Cold War: A Contemporary History* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019); Ang, *Singapore, ASEAN, and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013).

significant in helping define and clarify the organization's mission and purpose, from Pakistan's unsuccessful attempt to change the language of SEATO "to provide that an attack on one member would be an attack on all" to gain a security guarantee for Kashmir (47), to Pakistan being the first member to withdraw from SEATO in 1972 following the 1971 Bangladeshi War of Independence, which helped pave the way for all the other members to follow suit in the following five years (122). Perhaps the book could have been even better at representing the diverse member countries' viewpoints if the author had also tapped into international archival documents translated through the Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project and the Foreign Broadcast Information Service's records of international news media.[31]

Being able to elegantly weave together all these different perspectives is a very difficult art that Ang makes look effortless. His book takes us chronologically through the lifespan of SEATO with textbook comprehensiveness. Even as a specialist in Cold War Southeast Asia, there was a lot of information that was new to me, and a lot that I was happy to have jogged my memory. I did not know, for example, that SEATO was first pitched to the Colombo powers (India, Indonesia, Ceylon, Burma, and Pakistan) in the wake of the Geneva Conference in 1954 and rejected by all except Pakistan. I was reminded that while SEATO's provisions for collective defense against external attacks was weaker than NATO's, its clause for dealing with domestic Communist subversion was quite extensive and included provisions for economic cooperation (52-5). I was surprised to learn how SEATO's ineffectiveness in resolving the Laotian crisis of 1959 so shook the Thais that they considered withdrawing from the organization, which was the principal first step towards the US-Thailand Defense Treaty (otherwise known as the Thanat-Rusk Communiqué) of 1962 that has far outlived SEATO and remains a major pillar in American defense engagement in Asia today (82-3). I was also amused that the British stated plainly that they were refusing to host the 15th SEATO Council meeting in 1970 because they were embarrassed to be associated with the organization during the Vietnam War negotiations (115-6). The book sounds a note of caution for present-day policy makers against repeating the mistake of trying to force countries in the Asia-Pacific to pick sides, as most of them are independence-minded, strongly nationalistic, and would much prefer non-alignment. It is an important message that perhaps the author could have more strongly emphasized.

The book also has some of the most common shortcomings of diplomatic history. On a theoretical level, while there is a sprinkling of citations of some key International Relations scholars, there is not a significant attempt to deal with the growing IR literature on alliances as international organizations.[32] There is a missed opportunity, for example, to dialogue with Robert McCalla's theory that NATO not only outlived its original purpose after the end of the Cold War, but even expanded rapidly, thanks largely to the self-interest of its bureaucrats and key stakeholders in the member countries, civilian and military, who directly benefit from that organization's existence and lobby for its reinvention and expansion.[33] That is not to say that the book is unhelpful as a case

[31] "Wilson Center Digital Archive," accessed July 3, 2022, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/; "Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, 1941-1996 | Readex," accessed July 3, 2022, https://www.readex.com/products/foreign-broadcast-information-service-fbis-daily-reports-1941-1996.

[32] Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 86–120; Charles Chong-Han Wu and John Fuh-Sheng Hsieh, "Alliance Commitment and the Maintenance of the Status Quo," *Asian Perspective* 40, no. 2 (2016): 197–221; "Network Power Edited by Peter J. Katzenstein and Takashi Shiraishi | Hardcover," *Cornell University Press* (blog), accessed July 3, 2022, https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9780801433146/network-power/; Nikoloz Esitashvili and Félix Martín, "NATO's Internal Deepening, Endurance, and Expansion: Economic Incentives and Gains as an Explanatory Complement to Realist Alliance Theory," *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 3 (October 1, 2020): 17–45, https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.13.3.1828.

[33] Robert B. McCalla, "NATO's Persistence after the Cold War," *International Organization* 50, no. 3 (1996): 445–75.

study of McCalla's theory. In fact, Ang's account shows clearly that SEATO was always intergovernmental rather than supranational in nature. It never had a unified command or any significant independent resources like NATO, and so its continued existence beyond its original aims would not have been politically supported by a military-industrial complex. Another theoretical debate that is touched upon but underdeveloped is the role of the rise of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the decline of SEATO.[34] While, on paper, these are different organizations serving different purposes, there is clear evidence in the book revealing that regional leaders, including those of the Communist countries, perceived ASEAN as a more acceptable regional organization for non-Communist Southeast Asian countries than SEATO, mainly because ASEAN did not include extra-regional members (142).

Ang Cheng Guan's signature dense Rankean writing style consciously avoids being dragged into these lengthy theoretical debates. His greatest contribution is in giving us the story of SEATO *wie es eigentlich gewesen* – meticulously researched, concisely and dispassionately presented. Ang's writing leaves much room for other scholars and informed readers to make their own interpretations. Even though the topic is very much in vogue, this style of scholarship has fallen out of favor in recent years compared with more critical, intersectional, and digital humanities-inspired projects. *The Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation* reminds us that a good, well-researched piece of classic diplomatic history is both still very necessary and a highly enjoyable read.

[34] Amitav Acharya, *The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of a Region*, Reprint edition. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 134–35; 169; Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (Routledge, 2014), 54–55.

Response by Ang Cheng Guan, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

I would like first to thank H-Diplo's Zhou Taomo for organising this roundtable on *The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation*. I am also very grateful to Harish Mehta for writing the Introduction and the reviewers, Andrea Benvenuti, Iain D. Henry, and Hoang Minh Vu, for taking time to read the book and for sharing their thoughts. I am deeply heartened that they agree that writing the book was a worthwhile effort and that the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) holds lessons for the present. As Jeremi Suri wrote in his essay, "Applied History and Diplomacy," "historians can help citizens and policymakers to understand their moment and to begin to imagine a future that has its roots in the past, even if it remains unknowable,"[35] an idea to which I fully subscribe.

While working on an earlier book, *Southeast Asia's Cold War* (2018).[36] I found much that had been written by historians on, for examples, the 1954 Geneva Conference and the 1955 Bandung Conference[37] but hardly any on SEATO. I thus felt a compelling need, as a historian of the international politics of Southeast Asia, to write a book on SEATO in order to plug the gap in the narrative(s) of the international history of the region. A recent survey conducted by Gregory Raymond and John Blaxman revealed that over almost 40 percent of Thai military officers have not heard of SEATO despite the Manila Treaty being the primary legal basis of US-Thai alliance and the fact that Bangkok was once the headquarters of the organization.[38] My colleagues (mostly political scientists) were somewhat amused that I would spend a few years researching and writing on a failed alliance which almost nobody remembers.

The book had gone into press (it was published in September 2021) when the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) involving Australia, India, Japan, and the United States held its first leader-level summit in March 2021 which produced its very first joint leaders' statement. AUKUS, the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, was launched in September 2021 and in February this year, Russia invaded Ukraine which suddenly revitalized NATO. Most recently, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand attended theNATO Summit in Madrid in June 2022 where China was described as a strategic challenge. In all the scholarly and policy discussions on the QUAD and related matters, I do not recall SEATO been seriously mentioned.

[35] Jeremi Suri, "Applied History and Diplomacy" (June 2022), https://koerber-stiftung.de/en/projects/koerber-history-forum/e-paper-a-new-global-order-history-and-power-politics-jeremi-suri/

[36] Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia's Cold War* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018).

[37] See for examples, Tao Wang, "Neutralizing Indochina: The 1954 Geneva Conference and China's Efforts to Isolate the United States" in *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2017) 19 (2) 3-42; see also my review of the article and the discussion of the literature on the Geneva Conference, ed. Diane Labrosse, H-Diplo, 3 April 2018: https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/ar755.pdf ; Pierre Asselin, "Choosing Peace: Hanoi and the Geneva Agreement on Vietnam, 1954-1955" in *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2007) 9(2) 95-126; See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya (ed.), *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008); Christopher J. Lee (ed.), *The Bandung Moment and Its Political Lives* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010).

[38] Gregory Raymond and John Blaxland, *The US-Thai Alliance and Asian International Relations: History, Memory and Current Developments* (London: Routledge, 2021), 4.

I am gratified that Iain Henry, who has just published a book on the subject of alliances, believes that my book will remain an essential resource for scholars and practitioners of the Asian security.[39] The book however is not without its limitations and weaknesses. Andrea Benvenuti would have liked the book to have devoted more time examining how SEATO members sought to build the organization from scratch. I agree that if I had or could have done that, the 'story' would be more complete. That said, I think it would have required much country-specific expertise and even language skills. In the writing of international history, I believe a collective effort would be very beneficial. For example, it would be worthwhile to assemble a team of country specialists writing in-depth on how each member state contributed to building the organization.

I also agree with Hoang Minh Vu that I did not spend enough time and space dealing with the growing IR literature on alliances as international organizations. I must thank him for introducing me to the work of Robert McCalla, whose 1996 article in *International Organisation* I only read after reading his review.[40] If I had a chance to revise the book, I would certainly have applied McCalla's theory on SEATO. The late Paul W. Schroeder, who was known for his skill in bridging diplomatic history and international relations, comes to mind as a model to emulate.

On Hoang Minh Vu's other point regarding the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), my own view is that the relationship between the termination of SEATO and the rise of ASEAN is nebulous. ASEAN was formed in 1967, the principal objective was to manage intra-regional conflict/differences amongst the founding member states. For the first ten years of its existence, nothing substantial happened and the external powers did not pay much attention to it, if at all. The first high point of ASEAN was its inaugural summit of heads of state in February 1976 (which was very much stimulated by the fall of Saigon in April 1975) where the member states signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and the Declaration of ASEAN Concord. The idea of terminating SEATO had already been seeded by mid-1975.

[39] Iain D. Henry, *Reliability and Alliance Interdependence: The United States and Its Allies in Asia, 1949-1969* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022).

[40] Robert B. McCalla, "NATO's Persistence after the Cold War," *International Organization* 50, no. 3 (1996): 445–75.