

Southeast Asia and the great powers

The latest offering from the prolific and much-respected historian, Nicholas Tarling, is an epilogue to his trilogy of books *Imperialism in Southeast Asia* (2001), *Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (2004) and *Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (2006). Tarling felt he had devoted too much space to the role of outside powers in Southeast Asia in the first two books and insufficient attention in the final book. This epilogue attempts to re-dress this balance and 'examine what had interested great powers in the region in the past and what had involved them there'. (p.2)

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Above: French political cartoon from the late 1890s. A pie represents China and is being divided between the UK, Germany, Russia, France and Japan.

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TARLING ADDRESSES the interests and involvement of outside powers in Southeast Asia by posing a series of questions: How substantial were those interests? How continuous were they? How were they defined? How were they pursued? To what extent were they grounded in Southeast Asia or imported? (p. 8) The author adopts what he calls a 'novel' approach in the writing of this book, combining both the theoretical ('partly') and the historical ('largely'). By theoretical, Tarling refers to the need to address the nature and dynamics of the inter-state system, which he does so only rather briefly in his introductory chapter. There is really no serious attempt to engage in the debates and issues of international relations theory. The strength of the book, however, lies in the historical. Whereas most international relations accounts provide only a general historical background, *Southeast Asia and the Great Powers* weaves stories that cover two centuries. A long-term account, as Tarling explains, 'indicating change and providing context and comparison, may enhance explanation of the recent and the contemporary. It may point to influences and traditions that affect the views of the leaders and those they lead, and help to validate the suggestions the book offers' (p.8). Among these suggestions is the notion that since the late 18th century, the interest of the great powers in Southeast Asia has been largely limited. Interest could, however, be boosted or restrained depending on the changing priorities and relationships of the powers in the region. In turn, interest could become intervention if local opportunities present themselves - such as division or among states in the region which might seek help, support and security vis-a-vis neighbours, hegemons or other outside powers. (p.8) Tarling describes this best with regards to the evolution of British interests in Southeast Asia. Initially, Britain's priority was to sustain the balance of power in Europe. She was therefore willing to exercise restraint and tolerate Spanish, Dutch and French interests in Southeast Asia, in which she had 'little intrinsic interest'. However, as Britain's commercial interest (intra-Asian trade/the trade route to China) in Southeast Asia grew, so did the tensions in Anglo-Dutch relations and the potential influence on the region of her French rival. Consequently, the British took measures to actively boost, protect and advance its own interests in the region. That the British were able to extend its influence in certain Malay states was largely a result of the willingness of local elites/authorities to make use of British power to back their interests. Another example is the involvement of the external powers during the Cold War particularly in IndoChina. Tarling also posits that post-independence, Southeast Asian leaders are aware that to prevent external intervention, they must deal with and manage their own intra-regional differences amongst themselves.

For this book, Tarling adopted a country-by-country approach beginning with India, followed by Britain, France, Japan, Russia, the US, China and ending with Australia and New Zealand (together in one chapter). Aside from clarity, there is a logic to arranging the countries in this order as Tarling hopes to show how these major powers reacted to each other and to Southeast Asia. In fact, each chapter stands rather independently and can be read on its own. The book is more a series of survey essays cemented by a common theme. Together they form a collage of Southeast Asia and the great powers over two centuries. The downside to this approach is that those interested in the policies of the regional countries may find the narrative rather segmented and occasionally repetitive. However, the focus of this book is principally on the Big Powers. I concur with the author who himself concedes that it is perhaps controversial to include a chapter on Australia and New Zealand. The book ends somewhat incongruously with an account of New Zealand and the region. Tarling justifies this, however, by stating that these two countries, small as they maybe, are closer to Southeast Asia than most of the other powers discussed in the book.

Limited intrinsic interests

The inclusion of India as a Big Power also raises questions. In the chapter on the sub-continent, the main point highlighted by Tarling is the 'striking disparity between its cultural influence and its political role' (p. 41). In the chapter on Britain, Tarling shows that Southeast Asia was of little intrinsic interest for the British. It was important in so far as it was connected to the inter-state rivalry between the British, Spanish, Dutch and the French. There was an element of commercial interest but ultimately, Tarling concludes, it was 'strategic interests that were most responsible for Britain's interests in Southeast Asia' (p. 82). Similarly, in the shortest chapter in the book, Tarling says of the French venture in Indo-China, while it might have led to a major military struggle, 'its intrinsic interest in Vietnam was never strong'. (p. 92) As for Japan, Tarling thought that Tokyo might not have conquered Southeast Asia if not for the impact of the war elsewhere and the Japanese really had no coherent policy for the region. Russia too had only 'limited and intermittent interest in the region' and its entry into the region was due to the Cold War. Throughout the Tsarist period, for example, Russia had no direct interest in Southeast Asia at all. Like Russia, the US only became interested in Southeast Asia during the Cold War and its involvement in the Vietnam War. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, American interests in the region 'had always been limited and largely indirect' (p. 136).

The chapter on China stands out and this attests to my earlier observation that the chapters can all be read individually and separately. Tarling starts the chapter on China with a very contemporary observation that the 'rise' of China at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries has led to much speculation about its future role in the world and

in Southeast Asia. It is the only chapter that starts this way and is in sharp contrast to the chapter on India, the other old civilisation, which begins with a narrative on the 18th century, mentions Southeast Asia only in passing and goes on to describe India-Indonesia relations in the 1950s. Tarling's China, however, is 'geographically proximate, historically, it (China) has always been in some sense a Southeast Asian power...' (p. 164). He poses the question, is history a useful guide for the future? Tarling's own response to this is that history is unlikely to provide clear guidance. In his words, 'Looking to the past with such a purpose in mind had, after all, always to be done with caution: it is likely at most to tell you what is unlikely, to remind you of what to consider rather than what to conclude'. I find that, having read a well summarised account of the period from 1949 to the end of the 1970s, Tarling's China narrative lurches rather quickly towards the mid-1990s, leaving perhaps too much about the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s unsaid.

Tarling is able to summarise and distill the key elements and issues of the 18th and 19th century very well and eloquently. However, his treatment of the later part of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century is somewhat patchy and less satisfactory. I get the sense that he is unsure of when the appropriate ending point/year for each country he has surveyed should be. To be fair, it is not easy to cover more than two centuries of history in a short chapter and in a book that covers nine countries/powers, (not to mention the ten Southeast Asian states).

Tarling decided against a concluding chapter choosing instead to end with a survey of Australia and New Zealand. In the last paragraph of his book, however, he reiterates that, for the most part, the interest of the great powers towards Southeast Asia 'was limited' and that 'their interests elsewhere frequently took priority', and that 'their rivalry in the region or in the larger world often intensified their involvement in the region, though occasionally lessening it'. The history lesson to be learnt from this book is that 'if Southeast Asian states avoided divisions within and among themselves that gave great powers opportunity or invitation, they increased their chance of constraining intervention' (p. 221).

My conclusion is that this book, rather than being an epilogue, is more of a companion volume to *Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (2006). It is definitely an erudite and stimulating survey that we have come to expect from Nicholas Tarling. I cannot think of a similar book by a historian. Most books on this subject are written by political scientists and international relations specialists. It is a certainly a valuable contribution to the historiography of the international history of Southeast Asia.

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