

## Projections of Power: The United States and Europe in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941

**Review Number:**

1052

**Publish date:**

Tuesday, 1 March, 2011

**Author:**

Anne Foster

**Date of Publication:**

2010

**Price:**

£14.99

**Pages:**

256pp.

**Publisher:**

Duke University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Durham, NC

**Reviewer:**

Andrew Muldoon

In the autumn of 1942, as Britain and the United States delicately negotiated the roles each would play in the South and Southeast Asian theatres of war against Japan, British colonial officials in London prepared to counter the American anti-colonial rhetoric which had already accompanied the first Americans dispatched to India in early 1942. The India Office consulted with the Foreign Office about American policy in the Philippines, specifically regarding any emergency power or authority the United States had retained when it had framed the self-governing Philippine Commonwealth in the 1930s, and whether any American official, including MacArthur, had used these powers from December 1941 onward. Given American pressure for Britain to bring about a 'fully self-governing' India immediately, one British official noted, any indications that the United States had itself relied on such colonial prerogatives 'would be worth while [sic] having on record here.' Unfortunately for the India Office, however, the former British consul in Manila advised that the Americans had not exercised any such emergency powers before or after 1941, and that MacArthur had specifically left the imposition of any wartime measures to the Filipino government itself, so as to ensure Filipinos' full cooperation in the war effort. Faced with this report, the India Office adviser noted ruefully: 'I'm afraid we shall have to give this up'.<sup>(1)</sup>

To understand fully the context and the multiple levels of meaning for this brief episode, one can now turn to Anne Foster's new study of American and European actions and interactions in pre-war Southeast Asia. In fact, this moment illuminates in microcosm one of the major themes she articulates in this book: how American rhetoric and action could simultaneously confound, enrage and encourage other European colonial powers in this region. The India Office sought to undermine American support for Indian autonomy by demonstrating that the United States had acted as a traditional colonial power in the recent past as well. Yet this effort foundered for lack of evidence that the Americans, who appeared to be colonial rulers, like the

imperious MacArthur, had behaved as such. A dearth of information, the realization that American actions in the Philippines might actually encourage Indian nationalists, and the knowledge that the United States was powerful enough both to save the British position in Asia and undermine it simultaneously – all of these provided the context for the India Office's activities of late 1942.

Drawing on British, French, Dutch and American sources, Foster argues for an internationalized and integrated understanding of colonial Southeast Asia between the world wars, but also towards the conclusion 'that the presence of the United States as a colonial power was instrumental in creating the type of imperialism which existed during the period 1919–1941' (p. ix). She sees an interplay among the colonial powers in the region, but emphasizes particularly the powerful, yet at times ambiguous, role played by the United States, a 'colonial' power to be sure, but not one cut from the same cloth as the European colonial regimes in Asia. Apart from the Philippines, it was the pursuit of strategic and economic interests, not territory or sovereignty, which propelled American policies and decisions in Asia. And even in the Philippines, by the 1930s, direct political control was being phased out, in keeping with the evolving American belief that 'formal colonial rule was outmoded, requiring new forms ... for knitting dependent parts of the world to more powerful parts of the world' (p. 5). Indeed, one might argue, as Foster seems to here, that 'colonialism' for Americans meant the successful pursuit of American interests more than anything else, certainly with support for the more formal colonial regimes in the region, though only insofar as these regimes aided and abetted the American project. Herein lay the roots of European frustration and even exasperation.

The likelihood that the United States might remain involved in a colonial system, yet not necessarily be of it, was apparent early in the inter-war period. While Washington refused to be drawn into binding agreements about the future of the Asian colonies, and pressed for a continued 'Open Door' for commerce and finance in the region, the Americans did act to maintain the colonial status quo 'often enough' to allay some European concerns, without at the same time supporting explicit repression that might limit American room to maneuver in the future (p. 16). Foster emphasizes the ways in which American and European authorities acted in concert to thwart indigenous communism, sharing information and cooperating, in one case, to return forcibly the Indonesian communist Tan Malaka from the Philippines to the Dutch Indies.

American economic and cultural activities in the 1920s also left something of a mixed message. Foster notes that American officials worked diligently to preserve the country's economic interests in the region, but avoided voicing any 'commitment to uphold a particular political constellation' there (p. 69). European colonial officials heard an American desire to maintain stability in the region, but also believed that the United States had a 'strange way of promoting stability' (p. 70). In particular, American firms and officials looked to undermine existing systems by which colonial powers controlled access to natural resources like oil and rubber. By 1928 American pressure, exercised through the nation's ability to consume and by the encouragement of native or indigenous producers, had broken British efforts to keep rubber production restrained and prices artificially high. The American government also used its control of domestic oil concessions to negotiate for a place for a Standard Oil subsidiary in the Indies, denying access to American oilfields to Royal Dutch-Shell until Americans could gain a foothold in Indonesia.

The spread of American culture in myriad ways was perhaps of even greater concern to Europeans charged with preserving their nations' long-term fortunes in Asia. In her cogently argued and integrated chapter three, Foster relates the various forms such 'culture' took and the pathways on which it moved through all of colonial Southeast Asia. She also argues for a recognition of the ambiguous politics of these cultural diffusions, claiming that Americans viewed cultural transmissions, the encouragement of consumption and the spread of capitalist ideas as helping move Asians towards 'modernity' and eventual self-government, but also as ways of ensuring the continued importance of the United States as an imperial force of some kind in the region for the long-term as well. American consumer goods, from automobiles to films, flooded into Asia in the 1920s, as did American missionaries and industrialists who saw themselves as introducing learning, democratic responsibility and scientific efficiency, all of which contrasted not only with indigenous practices, but also with outmoded colonial thinking. Indirectly, American actions in the Philippines garnered close attention from Europeans and Asians alike. It also may have confounded both groups, as noted above,

for she stresses that the fairly conservatively structured Philippine Commonwealth represented neither 'a danger to the colonial order ... nor the path to quick independence' (p. 86).

The economic and political catastrophes of the 1930s seemed to bring about a change in American attitudes towards colonial regimes in Asia, but Foster warns against seeing too dramatic a shift, as American interests still continued to drive policy-making, with support for empire remaining contingent on its benefits for the United States. With the global economy in collapse, American businesses and politicians abandoned their commitment to free trade and embraced a more traditional approach to resource extraction in Asia, one which privileged colonial exporters at the expense of indigenous producers. The International Rubber Regulation Committee, which set colonial export quotas to preserve the existence of these colonial states themselves, received qualified, but consistent, American support. Regulation did not necessarily harm the interests of the United States anyways, for American manufacturers appreciated the price stability, while the United States preserved good relationships with the European colonial powers, who were seen as eventual consumers again, but also useful allies against what many saw as the greatest threat to Asian stability: the rise of imperial Japan.

Political and military developments in the 1930s brought Europeans and Americans closer as well, albeit in relatively unsystematic or informal ways. American officials observed French and British reactions to revolts in Vietnam and Burma respectively and were happy to accept these powers' conclusions that the former uprising was the work of Communists, and the latter an atavistic effort to restore a Burmese monarchy. Communism remained a scourge, and indigenous politics resolutely pre-modern, in American minds, so there was little criticism of the violent and comprehensive European repressions which followed. In the case of Japanese expansion throughout the decade, a feeling of European confusion over American intentions continued, though it was now exacerbated, Foster senses, by the fact that only the United States, of all the powers with interests in Asia, possessed the 'latent military power' to stand up to Japan (p. 157). Discerning American priorities became a major task for Britain especially, but the signs were not at all reassuring. Much discussion centered on the future of the Philippines, where the British saw only negative outcomes: an American-led declaration of the islands' neutrality would provide a tripwire for an American response to Japanese action there, but would also mean the near-total removal of American fortifications and military establishments in Southeast Asia. On the other hand, a grant of Filipino independence without this neutralization established would mean the U.S. would have absolutely no binding obligations to this part of the world. Given the trajectory of American rule in the Philippines, these were the only options going forward, and it is little wonder that the British Foreign Secretary, Eden, could only counsel 'inaction' by Britain on the issue (p. 164).

Concluding her assessment, Foster argues that despite the complicated and at times contradictory actions taken and relationships established by the Americans in Southeast Asia between the world wars, this subject requires more than simply (and very valuably) providing a description of the complexities of this particular part of the colonial world. She notes the importance of this period for the emergence of the notion of a defined and delineated Southeast Asia, predating the formalization of this idea in such structures as the Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) in the 1940s. (That SEAC became known to some American soldiers as 'Save England's Asian Colonies' speaks again to an existing American ambivalence about empire.) How the framing of this region corresponded to other regional identities – like the British 'Great Crescent' delineated by Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper – is one of the excellent pointers towards further research this book provides. She also makes a convincing case that America's vision of itself as an anti-colonial force in the region is not entirely uncomplicated, as her overall investigation has revealed that the United States, at least in its short-term thinking, tended to uphold and support the existing colonial order in Asia in order to pursue American interests, while simultaneously publicizing ideas and practices deleterious to colonial states' survival in the region in the longer term. This leads Foster to a final judgment that the history of American foreign policy in Asia, and perhaps generally, ought to reconsider the notion that United States policy after 1945 represented a sharp break with that before the war. Rather, as this book has demonstrated, concerns about communism certainly influenced American support for colonial states against insurgencies in the inter-war period. Moreover, the contrast between American rhetoric and American action regarding nationalism

and post-colonial development in Asia particularly after 1945 seems an intensification of what had come before, not a something wholly new to Americans and Asians alike.

Foster's writing is forthright and her conclusions precise. Some questions inevitably remain, of course, given the scale and scope of her project. One concerns not policies, but people. Foster notes near the end that one significant difference between the United States and other colonial powers in Asia was the lack of an American version of Britain's Colonial Office. American diplomats, officials and military officers came from divergent backgrounds and bureaucracies, all of which featured different training regimes and assignments. What role did this sort of set-up play not only in the development of coherent American ideas about Asia's relationship to the United States, but also in the ways in which European officials struggled to find some consistency in American policy-making or some indication that there was an identifiable 'American voice' in Asia? Were there continuities in personnel or generational cohorts who provided a sort of 'steel frame' for the pursuit of American interests? After all, these were America's elites as well, educated exclusively. Did some find themselves drawn to their similarly-privileged European counterparts' views of Asian politics and society, and could that explain the often convoluted messages the United States seemed to send to the colonial world?

One other aspect of American involvement in colonial Southeast Asia might merit further attention as well. As this book has demonstrated, there is certainly cause to argue for some continuities between pre- and post-Second World War American approaches to the region. There is also the question, however, of continuities between pre-war interactions in Asia and the ways in which the United States and the European colonial powers struggled at times to work cohesively against Japan in the war. British concerns about the United States' use of the war as a means of getting a commercial foothold in India, for example, should be seen in the context of the economic jousting between the two in the 1920s. The problem of distinguishing between what Americans said about India, Gandhi and independence and what they might actually do regarding India in practice was a further vexation to the India Office, and even Churchill. The sight of well-fed and well-supplied American troops in India, testament to the 'latent' strength Foster references in her work, further complicated the British effort to demonstrate imperial prestige to Britons and Indians alike. Friction and misunderstanding between the powers was nothing new in the 1940s, though the presence of Joseph Stilwell was!

The existence of these questions does not detract from Foster's work at all. Instead, they demonstrate how constructively she has raised, and answered, some illuminating questions about the American role in Southeast Asia, and how her vision of these interactions in the inter-war years may point the way to further enquiries about continuities in American foreign policy and about the American relationship to the idea and practice of empire as well. Readable, engaging and contentious, this book will be welcomed by teachers and students of American foreign policy, Asian studies and modern imperialism alike.

## Notes

1. See correspondence of October-November 1942 in India Office Records, L/I/1/820, especially A. Morley to F.C. Evans (Foreign Office), 21 October 1942, and Evans to Morley, 18 November 1942.

[Back to \(1\)](#)

## Other reviews:

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1052#comment-0>

## Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5362>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>