A New Cold War History from Southeast Asian Perspectives

Convenor: Ralf Emmers, Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore,

The Cold War in Southeast Asia is still an understudied field both in the general Cold War and Area studies, partly due to the lopsided attention given to the Vietnam War and East Asia as well as owing to the persistent global superpower-centre binary views toward the War. Stepping away from the conventional views, this panel will showcase the current research trend by bringing forward the locally narrated experiences and role of Southeast Asian countries like Thailand and the Philippines during the second half of the twentieth century.

The panel will also bring a Southeast Asian perspective on the origin and outcome of this globally staged war by placing the Southeast Asian countries as an active factor instead of mere recipients and victims of the Cold War. By pursuing evolving local perspectives on the global power competitions, this panel will insert new perspectives to the general Cold War studies and set new trends of research in the Southeast Asian area studies field for the years to come.

Panellists:

Chair: Ralf Emmers, Associate Dean and Associate Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore

1. On ‘periodisation’ and the antecedent of the Cold War in Southeast Asia
   Cheng Guan Ang, Associate Professor and Head, Graduate Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Email: iscgang@ntu.edu.sg

2. America’s Cold War, Thailand’s Cold War: Indigenization of the U.S. Anti-communist Nation-Building
   Sinae Hyun, Postdoctoral Fellow, Global Asia research cluster and History programme, (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore). Email: snhyun@ntu.edu.sg

3. Containment without Isolation: ASEAN and the Roots of Sino-U.S. Détente
   Wen-Qing Ngoei, Chabraja Postdoctoral Fellow Nicholas D. Chabraja Center for Historical Studies(Northwestern University, USA). Email: ngoei.wq@u.northwestern.edu

4. The End of the Cold War and Decolonisation of the Philippines, 1991-1992
   Daniel Wei Boon Chua, Research Fellow S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore). Email: iswbchua@ntu.edu.sg

Abstract:
1. On ‘periodisation’ and the antecedent of the Cold War in Southeast Asia
Cheng Guan Ang, (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)

This paper takes a leaf from Antony Best who noted that most Cold War historians of post-war British diplomacy generally write as if the Cold War only arrived in the mid to late-1940s without any pre-history. This paper argues that to understand the Cold War in Southeast Asia, it is necessary to delve into the inter-war years (1919-1945). In the words of Best, “surely if one is to make the case that the Soviet Union provided a profound challenge to the certainties of the Western model of modernity based on liberal capitalism and that this competition was primarily fought in Asia and Africa, it is necessary to give serious consideration to how the non-communist world perceived the Bolshevik government and the Comintern threat in the years before 1945. Only by undertaking such a venture can one understand the ways in which the Soviet threat came to be seen in the early years of the Orthodox Cold War era”. This argument is true for Southeast Asia as well. The paper thus challenges the periodisation of the Southeast Asia Cold War drawing out the continuities from 1919 to the early post-World War Two years.

2. America’s Cold War, Thailand’s Cold War: Indigenization of the U.S. Anti-communist Nation-Building
Sinae Hyun, Postdoctoral Fellow, Global Asia research cluster and History programme, (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)

Thailand was one of the closest wartime allies of the U.S. from the late Pacific War years and their special relationship continued throughout the Cold War. As a beneficiary of the American Cold War nation-building programs underpinned by modernization and counterinsurgency policies, Thai ruling elites actively utilized this collaborative mechanism to prepare the basis of their own power domination. This presentation therefore looks at the Thai collaborating elite’s “indigenization” of the American anti-communist nation-building programs to better understand the ways in which the U.S. government’s intended foreign policies entailed unintended consequences in Thailand and largely in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. For a sharper analysis, it examines the context, conduct and consequence of the Thai military elite and royal family’s transformation of the American “development for security” policies into their own nation-building programs between 1957 and 1973. Based on the analysis, I will argue that the American Cold War system effectively served the Thai ruling elite’s agendas of consolidating Thai nation-state under royalist nationalism. In this way, the presentation challenges the conventional Cold War binaries and highlights the significance of including the narratives of locally practiced Cold War system into the general Cold War studies.

3. Containment without Isolation: ASEAN and the Roots of Sino-U.S. Détente
Wen-Qing Ngoei, Chabraja Postdoctoral Fellow Nicholas D. Chabraja Center for Historical Studies(Northwestern University, USA).

This paper argues that ASEAN leaders from the late 1960s through the early 1970s directly influenced the emergence and terms of Sino-U.S. détente. Studies of this pivotal moment in global history have emphasized how the United States, China, and the USSR were central to thawing the Cold War. Equally, scholars hold that the Nixon administration’s decision to visit China shocked its ASEAN allies and forced them to also normalize relations with China. The paper analyzes American, British and Southeast Asian sources to reveal how ASEAN leaders made China susceptible to the U.S.’s overtures for détente. As ASEAN leaders strengthened their ties to the pro-U.S. Asian states,
the western powers and America, Beijing came to accept that it had become encircled and increasingly isolated. President Richard Nixon exploited this by pursuing détente with China as part of a strategy he called “containment without isolation,” an offer that China could not refuse. At the same time, ASEAN leaders wary of U.S. withdrawal from the region pre-empted Nixon’s visit to China by plying Premier Zhou Enlai with their ideas for neutralizing Southeast Asia, directly shaping Zhou’s subsequent discussions with Nixon and the articles of the landmark Shanghai Communiqué that formalized Sino-U.S. détente.

4. The End of the Cold War and Decolonisation of the Philippines, 1991-1992
Daniel Wei Boon Chua, Research Fellow S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)

The United States granted independence to the Philippines in 1946 but maintained control of American military bases during the Cold War period. The existence of U.S. bases cast doubts over true Filipino independence. With the expiring of the Military Bases Agreement and the end of the Cold War conflict in 1991, the Philippine Senate cast the monumental vote to cease American military presence in the country. The loss of bases in the Philippines, it was feared, would lead to a complete withdrawal of American presence in Southeast Asia, which was beginning to see greater Chinese influence in the region. Based on an analysis of records from the U.S. and the Philippines, as well as oral accounts of Filipino officials, this paper examines U.S. strategic thinking during the closing years of the Cold War, and how it meshed with the political climate in the Philippines. By analysing American influence on Philippine decision-making during the Cold War, this research argues that U.S. military presence and alliance with the Philippines kept the latter dependent on U.S. defence protection, and the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces after the Cold War marked the final decolonisation of the Filipino people.