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A BOOK REVIEW OF THE UNITED STATES MOVES ACROSS THE PACIFIC

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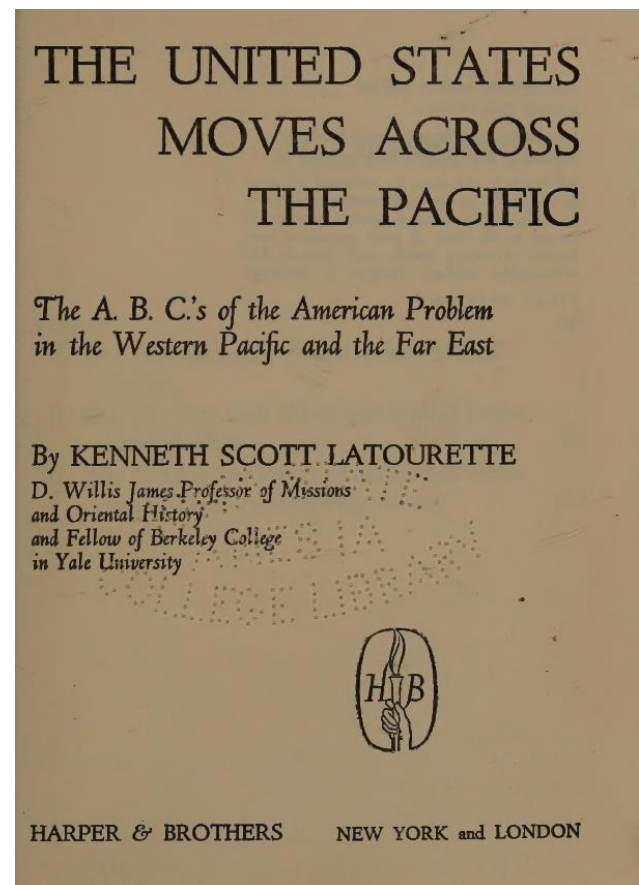
Name of Book: The United States Moves Across the
Pacific *The A. B. C.'s of the American Problems
in the Western Pacific and the Far East*

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ABSTRACT

In discussing the United States as a dominant geopolitical power in the 21st century, one must first make it clear that to understand its present role in the Asia-Pacific region, it is befitting to trace back how it originally began. Published in 1946, Kenneth Scott Latourette's *The United States Moves Across the Pacific* gives the readers an informed and legible account of his perspective on the existing status of the United States as a power in the immediate postwar period. As shown in this book review, Latourette's insightful examination of the evolution of the United States originally from a novice, upon attaining independence, that utilized its desire to look for commercial partners as a first step towards exploring their role in the Asian setting, to reaching maturity as a player who successfully integrated power and policy as a method of flexing its rising influence in the global power which resulted in unwanted obligations that could jeopardize its standing relationship to these Asian nations. In sum, despite being published in the mid-20th century, Latourette's account exudes a unique quality of perpetuity as the essence of its contents is still lingering and very much evident in the present-day makings of the relationship between the United States and selected Asian nations mentioned in the book.

Keywords: Asian History, Kenneth Scott Latourette, Postwar Period, United States History

I. INTRODUCTION

Then United States Secretary of State James F. Byrnes declared in his book *Speaking Frankly*, written in 1947, "our own safety and security, as well as peace in the world, depends upon our success in being on the side of progress of Asia" (Byrnes 1947, p. 229). At that time, such a declaration, which seeks to align the foreign policies of the United States to the pragmatic existing conditions of these 'Far Eastern'² nations, is not only ambitious but intellectually and politically daunting. It assumes the

² The use of the term 'Far Eastern' by Latourette shows the prevailing and accepted geographical, historical, geopolitical conception about partitioning of the world during the 1940s. In the 21st century, the use of this specific term is seen as outdated, and it is now replaced by scholars and researchers with the term 'Asia Pacific', referring to the areas in the East and Southeast Asia facing the Pacific Ocean.

Americans taking up calculated risks, not only limited to military and financial aspects, but also intellectually, that could fundamentally jeopardize not only their position on the international stage against the rising and encroaching influence of the Soviet Union, but also in terms of national matters of interest.

Thus, Kenneth Scott Latourette's book emphasizes that influence and responsibilities in the 'Far East' by the Americans have increased, starting with the surprise attack done by the Imperial Japanese forces on Pearl Harbor which ultimately dragged them into the Pacific theatre of the Second World War (Latourette 1946, p. vii), and will eventually continue to increase rather than diminish in the years to come – and as the historical records will show, it indeed happened. The purpose, then, of this book is not only to succinctly trace the development of American interests in these nations and vice versa for the consumption of the general populace and scholars and policymakers alike, but to point out the inherent paradox in the nature of the American diplomatic recourse with these nations and to give suggestions on how the policymakers could mold and promote their approach in a more intuitive and well-informed manner.

II. SUMMARY

The book is divided into three parts, which were structured by the author in such a way, it shows the chronological progress of the American-Far Eastern relations. The first chapter deals with the 'past' in which the discussion is centered on what drives the United States to successfully assume an immense role in the Far Eastern Affairs, to which Latourette answered with a very conspicuous and clear response: trade. Latourette stressed that the United States has been pursuing a course from which there seems to be no probability of withdrawal which started not in 1898 when America crossed the Pacific and acquired the last colonies of the Spanish Empire in the area to secure a foothold in the partitioning of China between the Great Powers, but in 1783, when the Americans proclaimed independence from the British Empire that allowed them to seek places to do trade and commercial endeavors outside of the North American continent that eventually started the Westward expansion, in which China became a 'dream place' for the Americans (Latourette 1946, pp. 6-7).

He also stressed that the immense role that the United States has assumed in the area is not a byproduct of chance or a result of a necessary intervention, but rather it was a purposeful one. At first, Americans did not force themselves nor use armed force to secure a footing in the area (Latourette

1946, p. 10), for the government was averse to having its country be involved in any type of trouble in the area. But the winds have changed towards a more militaristic intervention in 1899, owing to the confidence given by the acquisition of the Philippines and Guam that they could have a military outpost in the area to secure their share in Mainland China which was facilitated mainly by the Open Door Policy (Latourette 1946, pp. 16-17), which ultimately cemented their footing in the region. In comparison to modern-day works of roughly the same field, such a historically-based thesis was irresistible for students of history, politics, and international studies

The second chapter addresses the 'present', which presents a fairly objective discussion on the existing conditions of the 'Far East' in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. It includes a brief yet exhaustive summary of the political, social, and economic conditions of China, Japan, and to a lesser extent, the other parts of the Far East, such as Korea, Hongkong, the Netherlands East Indies, Singapore, Malaya, and even Australia and New Zealand, to which the United States will have to reckon with as they gauge their ability of equally handling and treating both domestic and international affairs.

Similarly, any present-day readers who are familiar with the national histories of these nations will be intrigued that the details within Latourette's book are either not far from what is written in contemporary academic publications or it present provocative thoughts that might not echo the prevailing ideas presented in the present times. For example, the Mukden incident of 1931. Latourette claimed that due to the said incident, although not technically, China was at war with the Japanese Empire until April 1945 (Latourette 1946, p. 69). Present-day scholarly works, however, will inculcate in the minds of their readers that the commencement of Sino-Japanese hostilities was in 1937, not in 1931, albeit officially, thus creating some sort of confusion. Another unusual example of Latourette's narrative, which modern-day readers may find bewildering, is that in the aftermath of the Second World War, Australia and New Zealand, Latourette claims, "will seek territorial compensation for some of their sacrifices in the common cause." (Latourette 1946, p. 104) Where did Latourette get his idea for expressing such a statement? If this means that Latourette implies that both Australia and New Zealand have a hidden imperial impulse, it makes it equally absurd to think about. In fact, Australia and New Zealand want no extension of their territorial domain as they are content with the territorial bases present in their territory, and in reality, it was the other way around; the United States has the desire for more American bases in the area as nations such as the Philippines and Indonesia have become independent.

And the last chapter tries to grapple with the 'future' of the Far Eastern Policy of the United States. Yet even in the hour of glory which the Americans have relished after the war, Latourette acknowledges the fact that "to offer any concrete suggestions is to enter debatable ground" because the situation within the US and the Far Eastern nations is constantly shifting (Latourette 1946, p. 127). A crucial ingredient, according to Latourette, to ascertain the success of this relation is the respectful treatment and domestic reception of the Americans towards the Asian immigrants in the United States, to gain respect from the inhabitants back in their home country (Latourette 1946, pp. 160-161). Furthermore, referring to the future relationship of the Americans with the Japanese, Latourette himself argues that: the United States has "earned the right to a voice in the future of these lands" (Latourette 1946, p. 166), wherein such a statement has conspicuously expressed how the Americans have determined their role in both East and Southeast Asian region from 1946 up until the present times. In the end, Latourette reasonably argued that rather than a one-time enterprise in which there is a chance of retreating if the situation is already unfavorable, the crossing of the Pacific by the Americans turned out to be a mammoth choice as it began a large-scale experiment of custodianship which, for better or for worse, has stayed.

III. ANALYSIS

The strength of the book lies not only in its well-organized and structured discussion of the matter, but also in the use of lay terminologies for the uncomplicated transmission of the intended message of the author to its readers. After all, the use of political, economic, and historical jargon obfuscates more than it explains, thus defeating the very purpose of the book of educating the readers of any intellectual capacities, as stated earlier.

If there is any downside of the book, it is with the author's over-association of the Far Eastern region with only two nations, namely: China (which was fractured by the resumption of the Civil War between the Nationalists and the Communists) and Japan (the start of the US occupation), which constitute the bulk of the discussion. It is quite a disappointing sight to see as it tends to conceptually neglect the broad swath of other nations in the area. Though it must be important to state there are instances and snippets of a passing discussion about other nations in the Far Eastern region, such as Korea and the Philippines (which was about to gain its independence from the Americans in 1946). To restrict the bulk of the discussion made to China and Japan is not to deny the importance of the other

nations in the region, but it risks fostering some sort of unintended diminution in the geopolitical importance of the nations to the eyes of the United States. However, Latourette's myopic discussion and treatment of the American intervention in the 'Far East' is not an isolated phenomenon; it is a symptom of Americans' reading and schema about the region, a sickness which was shared by a general part of the American populace, which lamentably includes American civil and military officials as well as foreign policymakers.

In addition, there are areas of discussion made by Latourette that remain insufficient or contentious. Latourette's discussion of the Sino-Soviet conflict over Manchuria in 1929, in pages 35-36, is a welcome addition to his account; however, he left a huge gap with respect to the treatment of Soviet forces to the Chinese people in Manchuria at that time and vice versa, which vitiates the correctness of his narration. His sole focus on American intervention in the said conflict obfuscates the event even more to its reader, rather than acquainting them with the significance of the event in the eventual molding of American policy in the Far East at that time. Then, for Latourette, the year 1898 was *the* year that the United States became a 'Far Eastern Power' (Latourette 1946, p. 4). This book reviewer suspects that he equates it with the defeat and eventual expulsion of the Spanish forces in the Philippines by the Americans. But it is too much of a value judgment for Latourette to proclaim that they essentially became a far eastern power by that definitive act. Thus, it begs the question, was the year 1898 *the* year that the United States became a 'Far Eastern Power'? To answer in the affirmative, as Latourette himself argued, is simply to commit a historical fallacy, but he has fallen into the trap himself.

Despite Latourette's book was published in the year 1946, it is a timely endeavor for students of history, politics, international relations, and even laymen outside the university gates, given the state of U.S.-Southeast Asia and U.S.-East Asia relations in the present times, but it modestly contributes to our understanding of the roots of United States' elusive and paradoxical entrance to the Pacific region as they vie for hegemonic control and power over the region. It is important, then, to have an intricate interrogation and comparative analysis of the 'two United States' at play: the United States of '1946' (the period in which Latourette wrote the book) and the United States of the 21st century vis-à-vis the nature of American intervention in the region.

In the past, the role of the United States in the Pacific was generally understood as the culmination of American national history, particularly in that of the "Manifest Destiny." Ironically, as the nation reached the zenith of glory in the international stage after emerging victorious in the Second

World War, which shattered the world order that was domineered by European nation-states, the limits to its power and influence came more palpable as they were heavily tested by the rise of Communism that paved the way for the Cold War with the Soviet Union that lasted up until 1991 (Herring 2008, 9). Energized with an indomitable spirit and enthusiasm in fighting the encroaching influence of Communism, the United States has moved with cadence to prevent its spread throughout the entire world, more so when it comes to Asia, specifically in the case of China, Korea, and Vietnam.

As the Cold War intensified, the Americans had two strategic and calculated options: First, they saw the importance of Southeast Asia not only as a bulwark against the encroachment of Communism but as a vital instrument to ease the dollar gap experienced in terms of the economic recovery of Western Europe (Herring 2008, 634). As it turned out, Latourette's statement that the Americans have "earned the right to a voice" within the region has turned out to be a prophetic one, as it became a riveting reality. The region that was treated by the Americans as amongst the peripheral, often connoting lesser attention, zones of concern, was suddenly propelled to the frontlines of the Cold War. The entire region of Southeast Asia has become a perfect laboratory to gauge American efforts to thwart the spread of Communism, as perfectly exemplified in the Vietnam War, the draconian rule of General Suharto in Indonesia that lasted for three decades, the signing of the 1962 Thanat-Rusk agreement that solidified American pledge of military and financial assistance to Thailand amidst the ongoing Vietnam War and Laotian Civil War, and to a lesser intensity but significant, the anti-Huk campaigns in the Philippines under the Quirino and Magsaysay administration in addition to the signing of the Military Bases Agreement of 1947 which allowed the leasing of select Philippine lands for the creation of military bases in the hopes of boosting national security against communist forces and at the same time, garrisoned American troops and provisions for the ongoing efforts in Vietnam. Such a skewed arrangement lasted until 1991. The second, and more ingenious in terms of geopolitical chess match, option was that the United States had perfectly groomed Japan as the main defense against the rapid spread of Communism in the Eastern Asian region, more so when Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang had fallen into the hands of the Communist forces by 1949, and the sudden outbreak of the Korean War the following year. It became a prime example of "action-reaction" in terms of foreign policymaking, hence the chess match description becomes more befitting.

Thereupon, the United States of 1946, was the nation that saw themselves as the champion and custodian of the 'free world', replacing the declining British Empire as the major player in

international affairs, thus imbued with proper zeal and fanaticism, they embarked on their mission to prevent Soviet hegemony over Asia – a threat to the ‘free world’ piloted by large-scale capitalist infrastructure they are envisaging. However, albeit not always the case, when it comes to the different nations in the Pacific region, the implication of this American mission entails the routine disregard of national sovereignty and having a predilection of intervening in state affairs, under the guise of thwarting Communist encroachment, which left the Southeast Asians, and to a certain extent, the East Asians, a lukewarm, and to some degree negative, reception about American affairs in the region.

Now, what can be said about the ‘United States of the 21st Century’ in terms of its relations with the Asia-Pacific region? The communist ideological and Soviet geopolitical issues had been vanquished by the 1990s thus the justification used by the Americans in terms of intervening in state affairs in guise for thwarting Communism is not plausible. The temptation of recasting the world in America’s image is becoming more alluring, but the challenge of an emerging multipolar world makes its ambition quite daunting. Moreover, many have become pragmatic or even veered away from the perception of American exceptionalism in a globalized world system, as such pretensions tend to alienate others. Nonetheless, Latourette was certainly correct in presuming that the United States will still be in the region more than half a century after, for better or for worse.

Like the United States of 1946, the United States of the 21st Century have never been more present in the Southeast and East Asian region, boasting with the same energy and enthusiasm to spread American exceptionalism in the region, but more preponderantly different in terms of approach than what it was before. Taking a step back in terms of direct state intervention, the United States has redirected its energy in terms of binding their influence in the region by pursuing bilateral agreements with the various nations in the region, as well as being a key participant of multilateral cooperation, more specifically the ASEAN (in which the Americans have signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2011 under the Obama Administration) and at the same time, staying hyper-vigilant on the perils of the emergence of other industrialized nations in the international arena, namely China, which has the potential to rival their economic-military-technological prowess. Another key difference between the past and the present is the emerging significance of “technology”, as a form of state-building relations. It usually took the form of existence of overseas offices of technological companies (Apple, Google, Microsoft, etc.), e-commerce brands, and even automobile brands, into the region which explains the boosting of domestic economy that fostered national growth, and at the same time,

entrenched the use of soft power as a novel approach by the Americans to maintain leverage on these nations, under the veil of cordial, diplomatic relations.

In the end, the ethos of the United States of the 21st Century is very much similar to its 1946 version, which is, as a providential nation, it seeks to become unrivaled as a superpower in the international arena, but its main difference is that the present version has taken a metamorphosis of approach which is a result of decades-long heuristic approach in numerous issues faced in the region. Like a human being, as one ages, it obtains sufficient maturity and wisdom that translates into appropriate and prudent actions, which diminishes the opportunity of facing unintended consequences. For the next eight decades, the Americans have learned and must continuously to learn the hard truth, as Latourette's predictions in 1946 had expressed, that it cannot simply impose its will through military force, political destabilization, or diplomatic pressures, if they cannot get what they want, as they must set a paradigm as a nation of a paragon of virtues that is done through example, in which other nations would eventually follow.

IV. CONCLUSION

As a parting remark, it has been eight decades since the publication of Kenneth Scott Latourette's book, *The United States Moves Across the Pacific*. By most accounts, the United States' crossing of the Pacific was initially met with economic and commercial optimism, then upon crossing, it shouldered the role of an engaged regional custodian as it accepted responsibilities that reshaped and recalibrated both national and foreign policies of the United States and its Asian counterparts. It is given that as history unfolded, some of Latourette's keen and insightful explanations and suggestions regarding the formulation of the American policy towards these Asian nations were either proven right or wrong, depending on which nation is being talked about. On one hand, a present-day reader could still read that the crux of Latourette's narrative of the messy entanglement of American hegemonic expansion at the expense of the sovereignty of Asian nations, is still very much existing in the 21st century, as there are still instances that elicit a dynamic and sometimes revolutionary approach of perspectives when it comes to the Asia-Pacific region. After all, his account bridges the gap in understanding the historical temporality and eventual continuity of American foreign policy when seen from a modern-day perspective. Latourette's provocative and insightful account is not the definitive account of proffering the rationale behind the American crossing of the Pacific – it was never intended

to be such – but rather a meaningful contribution to it. Ultimately, as Latourette readily acknowledged, “The road will not be easy nor will it be pursued with complete success, but advance can be made” (Latourette 1946, p. 169).

V. REFERENCES

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