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LEGITIMACY AND CONSTRAINT: THE FAILURE OF MULTILATERALISM IN SEATO

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The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was one of several multilateral alliances built by the United States in the early Cold War. However, SEATO never became an effective alliance because it lacked the foundations for strong multilateralism. This work uses international relations theory as a starting point to evaluate SEATO's failings, and delineates the relationship between postcolonialism, American identity, and the flaws of American Cold War strategy in Asia to SEATO's ineffectiveness. American strategic and identity concerns invariably inhibited the benefits which SEATO could deliver for its members. The need for the United States to maintain its policy autonomy trumped any interest in empowering the organization. SEATO was tainted by the legacy of colonialism, and its small membership was unable to form a cohesive base that could either balance the United States or deliver collective goods to its members. By design, SEATO's constraints, and its legitimacy as a multilateral institution, were limited, preventing it from being effective in its own right or valuable as a legitimizing tool for American interventionism. Explaining SEATO through these lens in turns explains the contours of future U.S. policy in Asia in the Cold War and beyond, and the difficulties which policymakers face in attempting to build a legitimate multilateral institution.