

Review - The Incubus of Intervention

Written by Jakob R. Avgustin

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JAKOB R. AVGUSTIN, DEC 2 2015

The Incubus of Intervention: Conflicting Indonesia Strategies of John F. Kennedy and Allen Dulles

By Greg Poulgrain

Selangor, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2015

The Incubus of Intervention is a rarity in many respects: there aren't many works covering US foreign policy focusing only on Indonesia (especially for the 1950s and 1960s); there aren't many books dealing with differences between a US president and a central intelligence director covering a particular foreign policy issue; and there aren't many this well-researched accounts of events and issues leading up to and following the 1958 rebellion. Poulgrain masterfully creates a story line while thoroughly addressing the actors and relations between them on both sides. In his introduction he sets the goal of *The Incubus of Intervention* as identifying Allan Dulles as the "principal 'domestic opponent' to John F. Kennedy's Indonesia strategy. Throughout the book, Poulgrain successfully proves his thesis.

In the first chapter Poulgrain describes the historical roots of the situation in a region that has become Indonesia. We learn about the discovery of a gold mine with unrivalled quality in 1936 and the concealment of this information first by the Dutch authorities and then by Allan Dulles. The former were attempting to keep a stronghold over their colony, or at least over what became West Papua Region where the mine was after the Second World War. The latter was working as a lawyer for Rockefeller's Standard Oil at the time of discovery and had continued his industrial-military complex connections when he was serving in the US intelligence community. Through recounts of interviews with one of the discoverers Jean Jacques Dozy and a former Dutch Foreign minister Joseph Lunz, as well as accounts of official records, Poulgrain sets the scene of the Dutch-Indonesia sovereignty dispute over the New Guinea territory and the role of the American business and policy. Poulgrain also includes the wider picture of the Cold War and the importance of the Indonesian question for the superpowers as well as the limitations those circumstances imposed on the US administration in finding solutions.

After describing the contours of Kennedy's foreign policy and his approach towards solving the question of Indonesia, Poulgrain uses the second chapter to provide more information behind Kennedy's belief that Indonesia could and should be brought into the Western fold by supporting Sukarno. Kennedy needed Indonesia to be stable, secure and willing before deciding on any policy involving military elements in Vietnam. By this time in the early 1960s, the Outer Islands Rebellion (assiduously described in the fourth chapter) had produced a strong and central military command in the Indonesian military (contrary to the desires of the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Dulles), the Bay of Pigs fiasco led to Kennedy dismissing Dulles as DCI in 1961 even though he was advised to retain him, and the *Konfrontasi* between Indonesia and Great Britain over creation of Malaysia was starting to seriously escalate. In his 'democratic peace' approach Kennedy sought to appease the situation by promising Sukarno a state visit to Indonesia in 1964 which is ardently dealt with in the last, fifth chapter. This decision and Kennedy's policy regarding Indonesia in general were in direct opposition to what Dulles had worked towards for decades.

Some of the problems with Poulgrain's analysis lie in the fact that some of the underlying assumptions in his interpretation of events are not addressed. His narrative deals with the events in two problematic manners: firstly, he accepts that Kennedy's administration was either incompetent or completely clueless in case of Indonesia. Secondly, Poulgrain seems to neglect the possibility that Dulles was not part of a bigger group, maybe not even the most important one, within the establishment opposing the president on the Indonesia strategy. After all, Dulles wasn't

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even the DCI in 1963 anymore. Furthermore, Poulgrain never entertains the question of why Dulles never tried to get Kennedy on his side (and on whose side the previous president was and why). It is understandable and commendable that Poulgrain is attempting to shift the focus of conflict between Kennedy and Dulles from Cuba to Sukarno. Yet, except for portraying Dulles as a greedy, power-mongering proverbial bad guy and quintessential spook, especially in the third chapter (though the whole book is in fact mostly about Dulles), Poulgrain's evidence to support this shift is rather unconvincing. Was there a grave discrepancy between Kennedy and Dulles on how to deal with Indonesia? Yes, Poulgrain's book describes it and all the reasons behind it beautifully. Was this particular disagreement the crucial and deciding element of the dislike between Kennedy and Dulles and was Indonesia indeed the crucial geopolitical event of the early 1960s? *The Incubus of Intervention* certainly doesn't prove so – yet it also hasn't set out to do so in the introduction. Insinuating that Kennedy (and/or Hammar skjöld) may have been assassinated because of it seems unnecessary and futile.

Poulgrain overreaches the set-out framework and title of his book in several different ways: on one hand, it is set out to be about differences between Kennedy and Dulles on dealing with Indonesia, yet it seems that much of the text really focuses on proving that Dulles was an exceptionally strong individual through a multitude of examples. On the other hand, while researching and discussing side events and side actors is crucial to understanding such a complicated and complex topic, it would seem that there is no analytical distinguishing between the importance of these side events and the main events in Poulgrain's narrative – it seems as if everything discovered is described and then interpreted as equally important. In this respect, Poulgrain himself in a way takes away from the importance of the main research premise which is also reflected in the lack of a clear and strong conclusion in regard to the title thesis.

There is no doubt that *The Incubus of Intervention* is well written with much thought to detail while offering a sometimes disturbing assessment of historical global, regional and local events surrounding Indonesia's path to independence and the decades of Sukarno's rule. It is very dense, full of historical background and numerous pieces of information on events and main actors. The narrative relies on archival records, official accounts as well as personal memories and interpretations acquired through interviews and correspondence. It reads like a great story. However, it is exactly this novel-like approach that creates another problem for Poulgrain. Just because events have followed each other and share some significant similarities that doesn't necessarily create causal relations between them. The elements of conspiracy theory seem to go too far at certain points and may be undermining the seriousness and significance of the main thesis and research goal.

The main conclusion of this review remains that Poulgrain has created a remarkable, one-of-a-kind account of differences between John F. Kennedy and Allan Dulles and their strategies towards Indonesia that brings to light many important facts that have so far been neglected or have remained a mystery. He questions information and relations nobody else knew how to or dared to in this particular case. In this way, Poulgrain significantly contributes to our understanding of US involvement in Indonesia in that period. Nonetheless, he should have kept his introductory promise of focusing on differences between Kennedy and Dulles in dealing with Indonesia by using a more coherent, consistent and methodological approach throughout the book. In other words, Poulgrain loses the point of his main argument and title premise as he sheds light on so many other auxiliary points in this otherwise exhaustive study of US policy towards Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s.

About the author:

Jakob R. Avgustin received his Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Ljubljana in 2016. He is Editor-at-Large at E-International Relations and works in the Academic Services Office at the University of East Anglia. He researches the use of military force in international relations, particularly when authorised by the UN Security Council. His publications include *Realism in Practice: An Appraisal* (co-editor), and articles in *Sociology of Diplomacy: Initial Reading* and *Acta Diplomatica*. He is currently working on a chapter in an edited collection on Great Powers and post-Yugoslav states.

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