

Southeast Asia and Continental and Maritime Powers in a Globalised World

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Southeast Asia is a region of 10 countries. In 1967, five of those countries came together to form the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional association that took a long time to get going but somehow survived the Cold War and has become relatively successful. By the time the Cold War had ended in the early 1990s, ASEAN's membership had expanded, with Brunei Darussalam having joined in the 1970s. Four more new members joined later: Viet Nam in 1995, the Lao PDR and Myanmar (then called Burma) in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999.

The way ASEAN has developed is extremely interesting. With the exception of Thailand, most of its member countries were once colonies of Western empires that include the British, the French, the Dutch, and, in the case of the Philippines, the Spanish, and later the Americans.

By the end of World War II, all these empires had either dissolved or ended, and a process of de-colonisation in Southeast Asia ensued, with former colonies emerging as new nations. With the exception of Thailand, these were not really full nations as yet but simply borders around different peoples.

Thus, for the last 50–60 years, nine out of 10 members of the ASEAN have been in the process of nation building, a very complicated process because each of these countries is composed of different peoples with different histories, languages, religions, and cultures.

At about the time that these processes were unfolding, some big countries in Asia became more powerful: India to the west of Southeast Asia and China to the north. India itself had for a long time been under British rule, and China, although not a colony, had been controlled by many foreign powers for at least 50 years before the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949. Aware of the security consequences of these two big countries emerging, the neighbouring Southeast Asian countries were thus encouraged to get together and cooperate with each other for protection and safety.

Although it may seem unusual for countries in the middle of nation building to be at the same time building a regional association, regional security was a common concern that they all took as a challenge.

Maritime and Land Countries

Half of the countries comprising Southeast Asia are made up of islands, with Indonesia being the biggest and having the most islands, and the Philippines coming in second. Singapore is also an island. Half of Malaysia is on the Malay Peninsula while its other half is on the island of Borneo, making it part of the island world that geographers call the Malay Archipelago and that consists of five states: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Brunei. Being mainly composed of islands, the environment of these countries is maritime. Thailand, Myanmar, Viet Nam, the Lao PDR, and Cambodia, on the other hand, are on the mainland.

Historically, the mainland countries and the island countries had different kinds of political systems. Also, the economies of the island countries very much depended on maritime industries and commerce, and trading between the islands. The mainland countries, on the other hand, were more agricultural, producing big surpluses that built powerful kingdoms. They also had a different worldview that was mainly based on overland relations between states.

Most people that populated Southeast Asia came from the north and moved southwards. The first people to move were the ones who became the maritime inhabitants. They spoke related languages based on the family of Austronesian languages. Today, the most common Austronesian language is Malay, which is the basis for the languages of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. Singapore's national language is also Malay. The Philippines has languages related to the same Austronesian languages.

These people who spoke Austronesian languages spread out because of the accessibility of the sea in every direction, with some migrating east towards Oceania, then towards all the islands in the South Pacific including New Zealand, Tahiti, and, further north, Hawaii. Some went west towards Africa. The people who first populated the island of Madagascar came from our region and had gone all the way across the Indian Ocean.

We cannot tell exactly when, but quite separately other people came overland southwards and settled the mainland. These people spoke languages called the Austro-Asiatic languages, mainly Mon and Khmer but also basic Vietnamese. The majority of these people, the Khmers and Mons, settled in what is now Cambodia and the central part of Thailand; the Mons also settled in the southern part of Myanmar.

The Khmers, who have a very ancient kingdom, probably had big maritime interests earlier on. But they later mainly settled on agricultural land, became rich, and built great kingdoms, the most famous of which were the ones based in Angkor. The people who built the powerful Angkor Empire were the ancestors of the modern Khmers.

About 2,000 years ago, the Khmer-speaking people of the northern part were conquered by the Chinese, eventually acculturated to Chinese culture, and created the kingdom of Viet Nam. Viet Nam is very interesting because it has a language related to the languages of the people of the south but its political structure is closer to that of China. The Khmers and Mons, on the other hand, were more connected with the people to the west. Their culture, including Hinduism and Buddhism, came from India and from other parts of South Asia. That, in turn, influenced the culture of the maritime peoples of Malaysia and Indonesia.

Also speaking a language related to sea-faring people were the Chams who lived along the coast of central and southern Viet Nam and traded with China and India, and were quite wealthy.

All that time, people were still coming down from the southern part of what is now China. The Chinese had earlier taken Viet Nam and ruled it for 1,000 years. In the meantime, the Thais also came, along with the Barma or Burmese people who came from what is now the province of Yunnan. They spoke a language closely related to the Tibeto-Burman languages. But as they settled in the south, they had to sort out who should rule. In time, the people who came from the north prevailed over those who had earlier settled in the south.

When the Vietnamese pushed southwards, they occupied Cham territories and dispersed the Cham people. Similarly, the Thais arrived from the north and reduced the size of the Khmer empire. Incidentally, the Thais are related to the people of the Lao PDR, and they occupied both sides of the Mekong River.

On the other side, the Barma headed south and fought the Mon people over many centuries before defeating and gradually absorbing them into Myanmar culture. The original people in the delta areas of the Menan, Mekong, Salween, and Irrawaddy rivers basically lost to the northerners pushing southwards. Although these continental peoples defeated the delta people further south, the ruling elites remained continental in their way of thinking and organising themselves, in the way their states were developed, and in the way their political systems were consolidated. On the other hand, the maritime peoples of the island world who developed their own kinds of polities remained significantly different from those continental kingdoms.

Two Different Mindsets

Southeast Asia is therefore of two different mindsets: a free, open maritime mindset and a more fixed, land-based continental mindset that, in their different ways, determined the respective cultures and politics. Thus, it is not hard to understand why these countries did not have a sense of region and belonging.

The records from the last 500 years bear this out. For example, when the Europeans arrived in the 16th century, they found that the Malay world they dealt with was very free and open. Although they arrived by sea, they were unlike the Indians, Persians, and Arabs who had been trading peacefully by sea for more than 1,000 years, and who had established good relations between peoples and transmitted new ideas, beliefs, artistic expressions, and philosophy to the Southeast Asian world.

The Europeans arrived in these parts after long-distance travel that required different kinds of ships, organisation, and armaments. Normally, traders crossing the Indian Ocean and trading along the coast of Asia were not so well armed as they were mainly going from coast to coast. But the Europeans who travelled down the Atlantic, past South Africa, and into the Indian Ocean were strongly armed to defend themselves against foreign navies as well as pirates and marauders. So the early European arrivals were a completely new factor in Southeast Asia, and they became stronger with every successful expedition. This new wealth helped to enrich Western Europe and helped several countries undergo transformative changes, enabling them to develop into great maritime powers that could control the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific Ocean.

That process marked the start of what we call globalisation. It started slowly in the 16th century, had gained speed by the 17th and 18th centuries, and, following the Industrial Revolution, led to the rise of capitalism or industrial capitalism.

The Portuguese, the Spanish, the British, the French, and the Dutch all fought for space and control over commercial transactions and built commercial empires in the course of doing so. Earlier, these Western powers themselves had gone through many wars that divided the Mediterranean and created the kingdoms and city-states that fought each other over centuries.

These were the same Western powers that eventually created the modern nation-state. In my view, that began with the independence of the Netherlands from the Spanish empire. The religious war between the Protestant Dutch and the Catholic Spanish was part of a whole series of religious wars fought amongst many kingdoms.

Eventually, they had enough of fighting amongst themselves and developed the legal framework in which the sovereignty of each of the kingdoms would be respected by treaties. The Treaty of Westphalia was the first of these, drawing boundaries between sovereign states, some of which were based on the idea that each would be one people, with one religion and one language and sharing a common history. That was the ideal they thought would make states more manageable and also avoid unnecessary fighting. But as anyone familiar with European history knows, it did not succeed and Europe continued to be war-ridden for the next 2 centuries.

Nation-states did not exist anywhere else except in Europe. There they developed a set of rules on how to relate to each other, which was the basis of what we now call international law. First devised to sort out differences between nation-states in Europe, international law later expanded around the world. As globalisation enabled the world to be one, rules were ultimately, after the end of World War II, extended to cover the entire world.

The rules depended on the underlying principle that each state should be a sovereign nation-state, protected by treaties and international agreements that now form the basis of the United Nations. The United Nations now recognises 193 different nation-states.

A Work in Progress

Southeast Asia has been turning countries into nation-states since 1945. Through various influences, the peoples of the region have developed the structure of interstate relations that has now evolved into the international or global system. All these changes have come in the last 50–60 years.

ASEAN, with 50 years behind it, is still very young and a work in progress, always trying something new in building a community of 10 nations. Indeed, we are looking at a very interesting region emerging out of centuries of very low-key, low-level development, with lots of cultural exchanges and relatively few political conflicts. With ASEAN's emerging importance on the global stage, we must now pay attention to its maritime connectivity more than its overland connections.

Economic developments that have followed globalisation in Southeast Asia have been much more successful because they are based more on maritime than on continental trade. The whole world is now more aware of maritime openness and the kind of economic growth possible due to maritime trade and power compared with the constraints and limitations of overland development, which had hampered economic

growth for centuries in the past. Southeast Asia represents both. How the maritime people and continental people can learn to work together, to help develop each other economically, and to minimise their political differences may offer important lessons to the globalised world.

The continental powers, which include China, India, and Europe, remain very powerful and represent a different power structure. Maritime power has been more successful in the last few centuries but remains challenged by the continent and how it still develops. As globalisation takes shape, the relationship between maritime power and continental power has become more important largely because of maritime connectivity but also because the continents themselves are learning to deal with the maritime world.

The best examples are India and China, neither of which has emphasised naval power throughout its history. With the exception of the Cholas in the south of India, who once had a navy and did some fighting in the 12th and 13th centuries, and Emperor Yongle during the Ming dynasty who sent expeditions to the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and East Africa for about 30 years before stopping, almost no naval power has been seen in either the Indian Ocean or the Pacific Ocean or in the South China Sea. It is only now that China and India, both continental powers, are paying attention to naval power. Recognising that not to be engaged in naval and maritime terms in a globalised world is economically harmful, both countries are learning to be more dependent on maritime linkages that have made economic growth so important to the world.

Southeast Asia, in itself having continental and maritime halves as well as both continental and maritime histories, is located in between these two continental powers turning to the sea, and is a microcosm of the global tensions between continental and maritime powers. At the same time, the peace and order as well as future economic growth of the entire region would be impacted in part by how Southeast Asia develops. The future of Asia cannot be separated from these developments. This is the new world we face.