

Southeast Asia — Indo or China

By Mr. Ivan Welch, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

Introduction

Understanding the current dynamics of the world's several geostrategic regions, is a full time effort for the government, military, or business professional. In the past decade Southeast Asia has seen massive natural disasters, government turmoil, terrorist attacks and on-going insurgencies. Within this mix of tumults, the region saw economic expansion as the adjacent India and China lead global growth. US political focus is consistently drawn back to the region and the US military is often a first-responder in time of need. Study of Southeast Asia is well worth your time.



Indochina encompasses the geographic realm now commonly called Southeast Asia. It captures the two major world civilizations that have historically influenced the peoples of this realm. The archeological, linguistic and historical evidence depicts millennia of sequential migration of peoples and influences into this southern peninsula of the Asia mainland, and the islands beyond. Is there a primary influence from the past? Will there be a dominate influence in the future?

The Indic civilization has overlain and inspired the traditional cultures of Southeast Asia while the Sinic civilization has penetrated and dominated the economic activities of these peoples. This pattern will continue.

Influence of India

The kings and kingdoms of Indochina were culturally and politically influenced from India. Tenets of religion and structures of governance flowed from India into the settled agricultural states along the

great rivers of the region. Indian culture came across the seas, borne by the monsoons, as early as the 6th century BC. Hindic culture's developed medical arts and abundant trade provided access to leaders and communities along the coasts and river ways of Southeast Asia. Hinduism influenced the arts, commerce, and law. Brahmans brought Sanskrit texts on ritual and government, introducing Southeast Asia's first written language. Yet Hinduism's characteristic social constructs of caste and the subordinate role of women were not adopted in Southeast Asia.

Buddhism added additional layers of meaning, social structure, and links to India. The exchange of missionaries, pilgrims, and teachers brought Buddhist thought which overlay the Hindu foundations. The scripts of the Southeast Asian languages (except Vietnamese) were all derived from the Indic family of Brahmi scripts. This Indian cultural influence reached deep into the great archipelago of today's Indonesia.

Influence of China

In Chinese historical records of the Chin Dynasty (221-207 BC), we find that armies, merchants, and colonists pushed south into today's Vietnam with enduring cultural impact. Northern Vietnam remained a Han Chinese colony for a thousand years. No other area of the region saw this degree of Chinese dominance, yet, as early as the first century AD, the interplay of India and China within the Kingdoms of Southeast Asia was evident. Known as the kings of Funan by the Chinese, the earliest recorded Mekong Kingdoms traded goods and envoys with the two great civilizations of Asia. Chinese merchants established trading communities throughout the region. By the coming of the modern era, the landscape bore the mark of India's cultural and China's economic influence.

Geographic Factors

Southeast Asia consists of the continental peninsula or Mainland Region and the outlying archipelago or Insular Region. These regions, with the surrounding seas, contain a realm of rugged mountain ranges, long sinuous rivers, scattered plains and plateaus, and thousands of islands all within a tropical climate.



The Mainland Region can be delineated by the major rivers and intervening highlands. The headwaters of the mighty Irrawaddy, Chao Praya, Mekong, and Red River (Song Koi) lie in the mountainous southern provinces of today's China. The river valleys and surrounding plains of these rivers are the heartlands of the major agriculture-based kingdoms of antiquity and nations of today. The mountains and high plateaus create sub-regions and boundaries throughout the mainland. East-west movement is channelized and truncated.

The Insular Region consists of the major and minor islands along the equator plus northern-reaching islands of the Philippines. Lacking the great rivers of the mainland, this region is characterized by mountains and highlands sweeping into complex and continuous coastlines. The population clustered in the flattest and most fertile areas of volcanic soils. The great kingdoms of the island rich insular region were founded on maritime trade rather than agriculture.

Located in the tropics, the Southeast Asia realm has a hot climate with a dry and wet season. Topography and latitude combine in the northern areas to produce a subtropical climate with cooler

temperatures at altitude. The equatorial location of the major islands maintains their less varying, torrid tropical climate. The monsoon winds and rain influence most of the realm.

Cultural

The dominant languages and people groups of today's Southeast Asia are a result of a long epic of migration, diffusion, and assimilation. The greater cultural landscape reveals both adoption and resistance to religion, language, food ways, social structure, and governance. And the landscape never lies.

Southeast Asia has long been home to hominids and the earliest Homo sapiens. Archeological evidence reveals that people groups have migrated from the northern mountainous regions in successive waves of settlement and transit. This flow continued through the neo-lithic and iron ages. Rice has been the principle cereal crop since antiquity. The settled agricultural communities, perfecting wet-rice cultivation along rivers and in their deltas, provided the base for the formation of centralized states.

The earliest states were influenced fundamentally by the Brahmin religious traditions of India. As early as the sixth-century BC, Indian traders, driven by monsoon winds, traveled to the coasts of the Shrikshetra (Burma/Myanmar), Dvaravati (Thailand), Funan (Cambodia), and Champa (central coastal Vietnam). These contacts brought Sanskrit as the language for ritual and learning. For 600, years the Indic world brought a



holistic structure of social and political life that found root in the growing Kingdoms of the realm. For centuries Hinduism and then Buddhism influenced royal legitimacy and social structure; as shown in art, architecture, and the cycle of agrarian life. This is seen in the Buddhist Kingdom of Sriwijaya (Sumatra) of the 7th century AD and the 13th century Majapahit Hindu Empire in East Java.

The overlay of Chinese culture was restricted by topography and imperial interest to the valley of the Red River (Tonkin) and to enclaves along the South China Sea coast of Vietnam. Here the Chinese

Imperial Armies and envoys held sway for centuries (221BC-907 AD). Chinese commercial concerns established merchant communities throughout the realm, settling in ports and focal points of trade. This was the initial “String of Pearls.”

The importance of rice as a cultural and caloric element throughout Southeast Asia cannot be over emphasized. In the past, its cultivation and consumption was foundational to all royal societies of the realm. Today the commoditization of rice is a fundamental factor in cultural, economic, and political considerations. Thailand is the largest exporter of rice in the world.



European Impacts

By the 16th century European navigators had made their way to the fabled shores of the “golden lands” and began to dominate the maritime trade. This earliest interest is repeated today in the western world’s focus on maritime control and commercial mastery. By 1511 AD the Portuguese had captured Malacca, yet significant European cultural and political impact had to wait until the the Industrial revolutions of the 19th century.

With the increased demand for raw materials, European colonial powers launched massive efforts to exploit the largess of Southeast Asia; Britain in Burma, France in “Indo-China” (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia), the Dutch in Indonesia, and Spain in the Philippines. In the last decade of the century Britain and France agreed to leave Siam (Thailand) as a buffer state and made no moves to conquer that Kingdom. The United States seized the Philippines from Spain. Each power exploited their colonies according to national dictate, yet all left their

dependencies underdeveloped economically and politically. The British ruled Burma from Calcutta and provided the impetus for waves of Indian migration to both Burma and Malaysia for the purpose of plantation labor. The British imported Chinese labor for mining and agriculture. Colonial commercial interests grew and the region’s cities reflected these colonial pressures of mercantilism and governance. Chinese and Indian communities concentrated in these cities supporting colonial administration and commercial activities.

The 20th century saw the nadir of colonial influence after the conclusion of World War II. Independence and national movements removed the European and new world dominance. US intervention in Vietnam was the final massive military and political attempt to influence Southeast Asia from across the seas.

Today: Indo or China?

The influence of the People’s Republic of China and Chinese influence are not the same. Chinese communities that have existed for centuries in Southeast Asia are not political or national extensions of China. Yet they remain distinctly Chinese and maintain a separate identity in the nations of Southeast Asia. This Chinese commercial prowess is not widely recognized in the west.

These overseas Chinese communities originated primarily through migration from the coastal area of southeastern China, in particular Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan. This migration peaked in the second half of the nineteenth century, driven by British colonial demand and the opening of treaty ports after the First Opium War. These communities have assimilated to various degrees, but all have become significant economic factors in the host country.

In Malaysia, 29-percent of the population is Chinese. This overseas Chinese community controls 61-percent of share capital by market capitalization. They occupy 60-percent of all private sector administrative and managerial positions. Only 3.5 percent of the population of Indonesia is Chinese. The Sino-Indonesians control about 73 -percent of listed firms by market capitalization. By the end of 1993, they controlled 68-percent of the top 300 conglomerates and nine of the top ten private sector groups in the country. The Chinese account for 77

percent of Singapore's population and are estimated to control 81-percent of Singapore's listed companies by market capitalization (Richter 1999, 194-196). Thailand's Chinese population is the most assimilated in Southeast Asia. It is 10-percent of Thailand's overall population. This group controls 81 percent of listed firms by market capitalization.

Chinese clan ties and proximity to southern China create significant impetus for trade, commerce, and investment between Southeast Asia and China. Movement of goods from Guangzhou and Shanghai to the ports of Burma and Thailand is an efficient step along the route to the markets of the Middle East and Europe.

The Association of South East Asia Nations (ASEAN) is the regional voice of the Southeast Asian geographic identity. According to ASEAN statistics, since the launch of the Free Trade Agreement with China in 2003, ASEAN's trade with China has been rising at an annual average rate of 26-percent, tripling ASEAN's trade with China, from approximately USD 60 billion in 2003 to USD 197 billion in 2008. China is ASEAN's largest trading partner, accounting for 11.6-percent of ASEAN's total trade. To promote ASEAN-China infrastructure and inter-connectivity, China announced the set up of a USD 15 billion credit facility for investment cooperation projects. Chinese and China's economic clout is well established and growing.

Indic influence is more cultural than economic or political. In particular the newly won peace in Sri Lanka has expanded access to Buddhist pilgrimages to the island cites. This continues a 2500 year old cultural contact. As a sign of devotion and solidarity the first ship to enter the newly constructed Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka carried statues of the Buddha from Myanmar. This is an echo of the long Indic cultural influence in Southeast Asia. However this Buddhist culture of Southeast Asia is better echoed in the population of China (102 million Buddhists) than that of India (7 million Buddhists).

Conclusion

India and China, ancient seats of civilization once buffeted and dissected by western colonies and concessions, are now being moved by modernity into engines of influence both regionally and globally. Betwixt them lies Southeast Asia, a realm of great human and natural resource. These three actors represent 3.5 billion people (over half the population of the planet). How ASEAN responds to these

regional pressures may be an indicator to how global relationships will unfold in the coming decades.

China's growing influence is of concern to just about everyone. The Chinese are not new to Southeast Asia or to its commerce. Around 1350 AD, Ibn Battuta records the massive Chinese merchant fleets that dominated the ocean routes from India to China. The average ASEAN business person is well aware of this long history of contact and commercial interaction. Still for many US analysts this Chinese presence is considered novel and sinister. For the region, Sino-centric economic activity is normal and the expanded presence is to be expected.

This realm has experienced global commerce, foreign invasion, and internal achievement for centuries. India will continue to supply some sympathetic cultural support while China will continue to expand commercial contacts and commitments. What role will the erstwhile colonial powers of the United States and the European Union play? Who's military will police the maritime world of Southeast Asia? Who will dominate its world trade? Who will inspire their culture? Who will legitimize their governments? Who will count them as allies?

For the time being, China's economic influence is over shadowing any residual cultural influence of India. Whether one chooses to contain or engage the Indic and Sinic worlds, Indochina is the place to start. Cultural meaning can never be ignored, but commerce remains the leading indicator of intentions. Any professional doing "business" in Southeast Asia will be dealing directly with China or the Overseas Chinese community.

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