

Festina Lente: An Introductory Sketch of the History of ASEAN

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The term Southeast Asia is today a readily understood geographical and economic-political concept. Thus, when mention is made of the Association of South-east Asian Nations, there is in the mind of even the least well-informed listener/reader a rough idea of the area and states that such an association must embrace. It was not always so. While the concept of Southeast Asia had some currency among scholars prior to 1939, it was one that had scarcely any vogue outside the realm of academe. What catalyzed the definition of a distinct region was the Second World War. The Japanese 'by destroying colonial distinctions between the individual trees...set off the long process whereby Western politicians were forced to recognize the forest as a whole and in its own right, and to specify its borders' (HALL, 1968, p. 7). War promoted the concept of Southeast Asia in three ways: first, and not least because of Britain's greatest military catastrophe, the area became visible; secondly, the term was legitimated in the formation *South-East Asia Command*, placed under the command of Lord Louis Mountbatten, at the Anglo-American Quebec Conference of 1943; finally, war conferred also upon Southeast Asia a political connotation (CROZIER, 1999, pp. 37-9; MCCLOUD, 1992, p. 12; FIFIELD, 1992, p. 20). It should also not be overlooked that a book published by K.M. Panniker in 1943, entitled *The Future of South-East Asia: An Indian View*, did much to establish Southeast Asia conceptually.

Given the importance of Southeast Asia in the history of Britain's global imperial adventure it is surprising and somewhat baffling that modern analyses of the British Empire still refer so fleetingly to the region. This is all the more puzzling in that Britain's involvement in the region over a period of some three centuries did so much to confer upon it its modern configuration. Within the British Empire there can be no doubting the importance of Malaya, which, prior to 1939, accounted for some one third of the world's tin and a considerable proportion of global rubber production, most of which was exported to the United States. This made Malaya a vitally important dollar earner, whose trade was worth more than that of New Zealand and exceeded more than half that of India. Yet even magisterial studies of the British imperial experience, such as that of Cain and Hopkins, cannot find space to discuss Britain's role in Burma, Malaya, Singapore and Thailand (CAIN/ HOPKINS, (1993a and 1993b). Undoubtedly, the historical profession still reflects the obsessions of nineteenth century empire builders with India, China and the Dominions. Southeast Asia might, however, right at the end of the British imperial experience have come into its own.

By 1945 it was clear that Indian independence would have to be conceded, although it was hoped to do so on terms that would preserve special links with the imperial system. Furthermore, as a result of the war and the increase in American political and economic influence, Britain had lost her dominating position in China. Such a bleak imperial prospect did not, however, precipitate imperial withdrawal, but rather imperial retrenchment in which Southeast Asia was to play an important part. In 1947 the British Foreign Office produced a Stock-Taking Memorandum on the Far East, which was surprisingly upbeat. If Britain went about the matter with sufficient energy, it was thought that she could regain her fair share of the China trade. Southeast Asia, though, was conceived as being of cardinal importance in such a revival. It was considered that the region was a significant link in the chain of Commonwealth defence, with British leadership being recognised in even non-British territories. The memorandum stated:

It should not prove impossible in the course of the next few years to build up a regional system, with Singapore as its centre, which should not only strengthen the political ties between the territories concerned and facilitate defensive strategy, but also prove of considerable economic and financial benefit to the United Kingdom. This is an area from which we may hope to derive products with soft currency (e.g. sugar, vegetable oils, tea and coffee) which may enable us to cut down our purchases from hard currency areas. In short, South East Asia is an area to which we should devote close attention and where we should make every effort to try to improve our position (NATIONAL ARCHIVES UK).

Furthermore, a Cabinet Office memorandum sent to Lord Louis Mountbatten in February 1946 stated:

Before the war South East Asia was a comparatively unimportant and little known area. The war has demonstrated its political, economic and strategic importance. At present the existence of South East Asia Command provides a link between the various territories which did not previously exist. But the functions of South East Asia Command are dwindling as the various civil governments prepare to take over... Yet there will be many problems of common concern to some if not all of the territories in the area, and consideration has therefore to be given to the desirability of some representative of His Majesty's Government who can look at the problems of the area as a whole and who can promote co-ordination of the views and needs of the British territories involved and relate them with developments in the non-British territories in the area (STOCKWELL, 1995, No. 71).

It would, of course, be inappropriate to suggest any causal link between British imperial needs in the late 1940s and the foundation of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. The major purpose, however, of these introductory remarks has been to attempt to demonstrate that, for the principal imperial hegemonic power in the region during the immediate post-war period, the structural situation in the area and the world in general suggested the need to integrate the territories over which it had direct or indirect control, and those in which it had influence, into a synchronized whole.

Much British thinking on imperial issues in the late 1940s was predicated upon the assumption that Britain's imperial mission, *mutatis mutandis*, would stretch way into the foreseeable future. Within, however, a comparatively short period of time, the continued decline of Britain's economic position, coupled with the rise and clamour of nationalism and demands for independence, ensured that within