

BRITAIN, MALAYSIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE¹

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I want to thank Asia Pacific Research Unit (APRU), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Professor Ooi Keat Gin for bringing me to Penang again. It is always pleasant to be here. It is nearly fifty years since I first came, and there have been many changes. There were, of course, no USM, no APRU, and only, I fancy, a very small Ooi Keat Gin. But Penang has a respect for its past, and much of what I saw then I can still see. And the past goes back to the settlement of Georgetown and the building of Fort Cornwallis. Rambling round them a historian finds evocative. Who was there before? And why?

Starting my study of the British in Malaysian history, not quite sixty years ago, under the guidance of an old Malayan Civil Service (MCS) hand, the late Victor Purcell, I was struck by the fact that I had to use, not only the records of the Colonial Office and Foreign Office in London, but also those of the East India Company and the India Office, then preserved in the Foreign Office itself, and now in the British Library. As the founding of Penang itself suggests—and the naming of Fort Cornwallis after a Governor-General—the British had India in mind when they came to Malaya. They also had China in mind, in particular as the source of tea, which had become a fashionable drink in the eighteenth century, and did not

¹ Initiated in 2009 the Asia-Pacific Research Unit (APRU) of the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia undertakes to run a series whereby prominent scholars from the humanities and social sciences are invited to participate in a programme that primarily aim at bringing into contact internationally renowned scholars to interact with the university's community. Besides delivering a public lecture, the eminent scholar conducts a book workshop and a journal workshop. Emeritus Professor Nicholas Tarling was the inaugural APRU Eminent Scholar for 2009. This paper is the revised text of his public lecture delivered on 31 July 2009.

² Nicholas Tarling, LittD Cantab, was Professor of History at the University of Auckland 1968–1996, and for much of that time also Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Chairman of the Deans Committee, and Assistant Vice-Chancellor. He was the first President of the New Zealand Asian Studies Society. He edited the Cambridge History of Southeast Asia and Oxford published his Southeast Asia: A Modern History. He has written other books on Southeast Asia, the most recent being Regionalism in Southeast Asia and Britain and the West New Guinea Dispute 1949–1962. He has also written about universities, international students, theatre and opera, and a reviewer for the British magazine Opera. His own stage appearances have included Lear, Shylock, Sir Thomas More in A Man for all Seasons, Sir In The Dresser, and C.S. Lewis in Shadowlands, and for many years he broadcast Opera Hour on Sunday mornings on Radio New Zealand.

then come from India or Sri Lanka. Southeast Asia—and the Malay Peninsula—was indeed important to the British chiefly in those contexts, scarcely at all for their own sake. Commercially maritime Southeast Asia could supply goods that would help to fund the purchase of tea. But much more important were the strategic factors: the protection of India and the Bay of Bengal; and the security of the route through the Straits to China. More important in Britain's overall interests even than those factors were its European priorities, the security of Britain itself, the retention of naval supremacy, the balance of power that averted the dominance of the European Continent by any one state. Rid your mind in thinking of the history of British in Southeast Asia or in Malaya of an all-explaining imperialism.

In India, certainly, the British had built an empire, though that had not originally been their intention even there. For them, as for other Europeans in the seventeenth century, the object was to take part in an Asia-wide trade. But rivalry with the French helped to initiate the establishment of a territorial realm on the sub-continent in the eighteenth century. And in the nineteenth century India was to become the so-called 'jewel in the Crown'. Victoria indeed headed what might be thought of as a dual monarchy: in the 1870s she became Empress as well as Queen. But that did not prompt the creation of empire elsewhere. Rather the reverse, in fact: the British determined, for example, not to make China 'another India', as *The Times* put it.³ India was a burden as well as a benefit. Britain was a commercial state, the first industrial power. That was the source of its strength, and that decided its priorities. They did not lie with the further extension of imperial rule.

That self-restraint helped to decide Britain's relationships with Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century. It was enforced by political and commercial interests elsewhere. In Europe, Britain sought to sustain a balance of power. That was an argument for preserving lesser powers, such as Spain and the Netherlands, and for compromise with greater powers, such as France. Both these requirements could be partly or largely met in Southeast Asia. There was no good reason to displace the Spanish rulers of the Philippines or the Dutch in Netherlands India. Again, rather the reverse.

Commercial interests pointed the same way. An India-style policy in Southeast Asia would alienate the Chinese empire which had claims over the mainland states, and that, it was recognised, would damage the tea trade, which, carried on at Canton, was till 1834 a monopoly in the hands of the company that ruled India. '[A]ll extension of our territorial possessions and

³ N.A. Pelcovits, *Old China Hands and the Foreign Office* (New York: King's Crown, 1948), p. 125.

political relations on the side of the Indo-Chinese nations is, with reference to the peculiar character of those states, to their decided jealousy of our power and ambition, and to their proximity to China, earnestly to be deprecated and declined as far as the course of events and the force of circumstances will permit', the Governor-General declared in 1824.⁴ Even after the first Anglo-China war of 1840–1842 changed the relationship with China, the British sought to avoid open defiance of China's claims. China was to be an open market. Challenging its rulers would only encourage others to do so too, and perhaps infringe a territorial integrity that was advantageous for the most competitive commercial power.

For these reasons Britain pursued what might be considered a minimum policy in Southeast Asia, though it disposed of the power to do far more, even perhaps to extend empire over it. India became united, while Southeast Asia remained divided. It had little intrinsic interest for the British. What was important was protection of the Bay of Bengal and thus of the dominion in India and of the route through the Straits of Malacca and thus of the trade with China. The founding of Penang was the outcome.

In considering the concept of imperialism or exploring any explanatory power it may offer, you must be struck by the limits on British dominion in Southeast Asia rather than by its expanse. Manila, taken indeed from the Spaniards during the Seven Years War, was returned to them on its conclusion. The Dutch were turned out of their Indonesian settlements in the French wars, but returned under the convention of 1814 and the treaty of 1824, though the latter provided for Britain's acquisition of Melaka and Singapore. Britain, it seems clear, would not have intervened in north-west Borneo but for the enterprise of the White Raja, and even then it was cautious, declining his offer of Sarawak, making a treaty with the sultan of Brunei, and acquiring only Labuan as a colony. It did not oppose the French occupation of Cochin China after 1859 or the French protectorate of Cambodia. Burma was the exception to prove the rule. It was conquered, though in three steps, arguably in order to ensure the security of the dominion in India.

It was only in the early twentieth century that Malaya secured a rather different priority in British policy. The automobile age made the peninsula a rubber-grower and thus a dollar earner and Singapore became the site of a great naval base. Even then, of course, other interests were involved: the protection of the pound, the defence of India and Australia. In some ways, too, the shift in priorities marked an overall decline in Britain's power. The

⁴ Governor-General in Council/Governor-in-Council, 19.11.24. Straits Settlements Factory Records G/34/99, India Office Records, British Library.

sterling area needed the dollars. The naval base represented an attempt to defend two-ocean interests with an one-ocean navy. The Washington treaties of 1921–1922 looked to preserve the status quo, but their effectiveness depended on the signatories' restraint. When the Japanese abandoned them, Britain's inability to defend its interests was exposed. Penang was abandoned and Singapore surrendered.

When the British returned to Southeast Asia, their armies were substantially Indian. About 2.5 million Indian soldiers fought for the Allies in the Second World War.⁵ At the end of the war, Britain's Labour government wanted to retain a united India in the Commonwealth and secure the defence of the Indian Ocean. Prime Minister Clement Attlee had it in mind "to make it a condition precedent to the grant of Dominion Status or independence to India that India should undertake to provide defence forces sufficient for her own local defence and in addition assist, in Commonwealth or United Nations interests, in the defence of the 'South-East Asia Area'".⁶ But in the event Dominion status and then independence were coupled with partition.

'The effect on Army organisation of the granting of self-government to India and Pakistan is often overlooked', the Cabinet Defence Committee admitted in October 1949. 'For here was a highly trained expandable reserve on which we could count in time of emergency or war. While the cost of this Army to the United Kingdom in peace was relatively small, it was a definite factor in our potential military strength'. As Commonwealth members, however, India and Pakistan should, the British considered, 'accept the obligation' to defend neighbouring territories, 'including the possibility that the might entail the employment of some of their forces outside their own territory'. The two Dominions 'would have to maintain in peacetime defence organisations larger than they would need for their own purposes'.⁷ Britain modified the nature of the Commonwealth so as to retain India's membership. But that did not re-acquire the military strength that the British had once been able to deploy, nor substitute for it. Moreover, the two Dominions were soon at odds. 'It was greatly to our strategic advantage', A.V. Alexander noted, 'that these two large countries, with their extensive resources in manpower and material, had decided to remain within the British Commonwealth'.⁸ But it was impossible to realise that advantage.

⁵ Anita Inder Singh, *The Limits of British Influence* (London: Pinter; New York: St Martin's, 1993), p. 16.

⁶ General Mosley Maine, quoted in Singh, p. 19.

⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 32.

Independent India yet played a role in Britain's policy. It was seen as a leader and an exemplar for new states. And it was also a factor in the Anglo-American relationship. Nehru predicted that 'a large number of smaller nations which today are rather helpless will probably look to India more than to other countries for a lead in foreign affairs'.⁹ He did not, however, intend to create, alongside the West and the Communists, a third bloc. 'India would have an important influence on the development of post-colonial Asia, since Indian wishes would be a factor there.' But the influence was to be exercised 'more through moral guidance than through military power... India's policies of nonalignment and anti-colonialism complemented its efforts to become a third great power through diplomacy rather than economic or military might'.¹⁰ That had political appeal in India. It was also realistic.

To others the foreign policy that Nehru's India adopted often seemed unduly moralistic, but it had something in common with Britain's approach to the post-colonial world. It should be a world of sovereign states, the British believed. Insisting on that would check the ambitions of the super-powers. And not only the Soviet Union: Britain had no wish to be submerged by its relationship with the US. Keeping Indian views before the US was a means by which it might itself assert a role. This was particularly clear in the case of Southeast Asia. Having helped to persuade the Americans to involve themselves in that region, the British also wanted to shape US policy, so that it might contain communism without provoking conflict. Invoking Indian opinion served the purpose. Indian and British attitudes were not, of course, identical. India questioned almost any American involvement in the region, rather than seeking and shaping it. The British thought India was too anxious to destroy imperialism, too hasty in its struggle against colonialism. Its moral tone was not only irritating to others. It prevented their fully recognising the threat of communism. Invoking Indian reservations might be a way of restraining the Americans, but it could as a result be counter-productive.

Though it had been no easy process, the British saw their decision to grant independence on the sub-continent as an act of statesmanship, and as an example to the other European colonial powers, France and the Netherlands. Imperial Southeast Asia had been divided among colonial powers, though under Britain's aegis. In what was now increasingly seen as a region – named in Mountbatten's wartime command—the British believed they could and should still give a lead. They hoped, as Lord Killearn, the

⁹ Quoted in Wainwright, p. 123.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 123–124.

Special Commissioner, put it in 1946, that Southeast Asia would be come 'a region of peace and orderly progress'.¹¹ The Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, wanted to 'bring this great area of South East Asia, impinging upon India and Ceylon, out of turmoil'.¹²

The colonial powers, allies in Europe, should be restored, but they should come to terms with the nationalist movements that challenged them. '[I]t is in our over-riding interest to see the establishment of just and stable systems of Government wherever possible in the Far East', the Civil Planning Unit argued in December 1945. In Southeast Asia it was 'unlikely that this objective can be attained without our continuing to play a leading part in the settlement of difficulties between the native peoples and our Allies'. That was not easily done.¹³ If dealing the Dutch was difficult, it was even harder to press the French, 'notoriously sensitive' to influences from outside.¹⁴

The advance of the Cold War made the process more necessary but more difficult, especially when Bevin took the initiative in creating the Western European Union, which included France and the Netherlands. They had pursued a less liberal colonial policy than Britain, Kenneth Christofas pointed out. 'There is a great danger that, if our alliance with the other Western Powers in Europe were to be correspondingly reflected in our behaviour in the East, we should lose the sympathy of the Asiatic peoples by whom "Colonialism" and "Imperialism" are considered a far greater menace than Communism.'¹⁵ Bevin began to look to Commonwealth countries in respect to Southeast Asia. Could they help in its pacification? he asked at Prime Ministers Conference in October 1948. '[T]here should be some regular means of consultation between Commonwealth countries interested in that area with the object of helping to put the political and economic life of the countries of South-East Asia on a firm footing, based upon internal stability and freedom from the menace of Communist attack'.¹⁶ That was the germ of the Colombo Plan of 1950.

On the outbreak of the Korean War, Britain endorsed the US position, though, burdened by its NATO commitment, it was at first reluctant to send ground troops. Interposing the Seventh Fleet between Taiwan and the mainland it found much less acceptable, putting off the chances of accepting Communist China, which, like India, it had recognised, into the comity of

¹¹ Telegram, 27.6.46, 1097. FO 371/53799 [F9648/1/61], National Archives, Kew.

¹² Minute, n.d. FO 371/53969 [F18076/8/61].

¹³ Draft memorandum, British Foreign policy in the Far East, 31.12.45, in FE (O) (46). CAB 134/280, National Archives, Kew.

¹⁴ Minute, 21.12.46. F18076/8/61.

¹⁵ Minute, 27.4.48. FO 371/69689 [F5922/286/61].

¹⁶ PMM (48) 3rd, 12.10.48. CAB 133/88.

nations, and so, it was hoped, encouraging it to behave like a normal state. A provocative policy might prompt China to take Hong Kong or intervene in Korea or elsewhere. An extended conflict in the Far East might give the Russians their opportunity in Europe, and even lead to a general war, in which atomic weapons might be used.

Since the end of the Second World War, Bevin told the Cabinet in August 1950, Britain's policy in South and Southeast Asia had been to 'encourage the legitimate aspirations of the peoples of that area for independence'. Supporting nationalism was indeed 'the best possible counter to communist subversion and penetration'. The US had seen South and Southeast Asia as 'primarily a British interest'. Only during 1949 did it become disposed to give Southeast Asia more attention, 'largely owing to the Communist threat', and Britain hoped that it would contribute to economic development. In the Far East, however, the Americans had 'tended to be a law unto themselves': they had not consulted others, and their policies seemed to be without a clear direction. India was 'specially worried ...lest American action should jeopardise the friendly relations which India is bent on establishing with China. But the feeling is probably more widespread that the United States is intervening in Asia and seeking to determine its future in a way unpleasing to the peoples of Asia and likely to be to their detriment.' There was a 'distinct possibility' that, unless American policy took more account of Asian opinion and susceptibilities, 'we shall find that Asia is gradually alienated from the West, which could only be to the benefit of the Soviet Union'. Bevin planned to persuade the State Department to consult with other powers, especially the Commonwealth and France, with the aim of 'reconciling United States and Asian opinion and... enabling the Commonwealth to keep in line with the United States'.¹⁷

In the event, of course, the Korean War expanded, and the Chinese introduced 'volunteer' troops. The anxiety of the British government increased, particularly when it seemed that President Truman contemplated the use of atomic weapons. But the conflict was contained in 1951 and truce talks begun. In general Britain's policies remained within the framework Bevin had set out; even after the labour government was displaced by the Conservatives in October 1951.

The same was true in Southeast Asia itself. In Malaya effective measures to deal with the 'Emergency' were adopted even before the Conservatives sent out a 'strong man', Sir Gerald Templer, and the military measures were the more effective because of the political context, a more rapid advance to self-government. In Burma, the British Government stood

¹⁷ CP (50), 200, 30.8.50. CAB 129/41.

by the Rangoon government in the chaos that followed the grant of independence in January 1948. It pressed for the withdrawal of the Kuomintang (KMT) troops that penetrated Burma from 1950 and urged the US to cease its covert support for them.

The Dutch had recognised Indonesia's independence in 1950, but the conflict in Indo-China continued until 1954. Then, of course, the British played a leading role at the Geneva conference that brought the first Indochina war to an end, though without securing full US endorsement. But, while not formally a member of the conference, India played an important role. In the Foreign Office records, there is a telegram in which Foreign Secretary Eden acknowledged Nehru's congratulations on progress at Geneva. Krishna Menon had been 'a real help'.¹⁸

Eden enjoyed another diplomatic victory in 1954, though it was also qualified. Getting the US committed in Southeast Asia on the right terms had long been a British objective. When the ANZUS treaty was concluded in 1951 without its participation, Britain had 'indicated that we hope one day it will be possible either to extend the Pacific Pact to cover South East Asia or to link up the Pacific Pact with another Pact covering South-East Asia, in which the United Kingdom would be a direct participant through her responsibility for the defence of Malaya'.¹⁹ But the US wanted to be 'left free to pursue their own military policies in the Far East without any international intervention'.²⁰

The new Eisenhower Administration gave Eden an opportunity in March 1954. As part of its attempts to keep the French fighting, Secretary of State Dulles called on 29 March 1954 for 'united action'. The Americans had in mind, as Eisenhower put it to Churchill, 'the establishment of a new Ad Hoc grouping or coalition composed of nations which have a vital concern in the checking of Communist expansion in the area'.²¹ The proposal was welcome, Eden told the Cabinet, but only after the Geneva conference. That would be the time, as a meeting at the FO decided, to pursue the proposal for collective defence. The arrangement, Eden insisted, should be framed, so far as possible, to secure Asian participation. Certainly, as he told Dulles, India should not be alienated.²²

This was the origin of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) treaty, concluded in Manila a few weeks after Geneva. Though it

¹⁸ Telegram, 22.6.54, 1065 FO 371/112074 [DF 1071/42].

¹⁹ Minute, 3.5.51. FO 371/93028 [FZ1071/1].

²⁰ N. Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Impact of the Korean War* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005), p. 200.

²¹ In Aldrich/Churchill, 5.4.54. PREM 11/645, National Archives.

²² Tarling, pp. 312–314, 319–320.

is often regarded as an American initiative, it was not concluded in the context in which Dulles had proposed it, nor was it what he wanted. The US COS had no enthusiasm for it, and was opposed to the creation of any permanent machinery. It involved, as Dulles himself put it, 'committing the prestige of the United States in an area where we had little control and where the situation was by no means promising'.²³ The diplomatic successes Eden enjoyed in 1954 were incomplete, though remarkable. Not only was the US half-hearted over the long-sought Southeast Asia defence treaty: only two Southeast Asian states joined, and, despite Eden's efforts, it met India's disapproval, especially given Pakistan's participation.

Later in the 1950s the British became anxious lest US intervention in Laos should lead to a larger war. The contribution of the US to 'the realisation of Western aims in Eastern Asia' was 'incomparably greater' than that of any other country. That was 'wholly to our interest', but there were frequent occasions on which Britain would wish to influence American policy', the Cabinet Committee on Future policy argued in November 1960. SEATO represented 'the first and only American commitment to the defence of the mainland of South and South East Asia', and it should not be weakened. A move towards accepting 'leftish neutralist governments' in Laos as well as Cambodia might reduce 'our responsibilities and obligations', but it would be 'almost impossible to carry the Americans with us'. The Americans, the Committee concluded, 'might not listen to our advice at all unless we had firstly a military presence in the area ... and secondly facilities in Singapore'.²⁴

Britain took a leading role in a new Geneva conference in 1961–1962, which, thanks also to a change of policy by the new Kennedy administration, as well as the attitude of the Soviet Union (SU), agreed on the neutralisation of Laos. That was coupled with increased support for the increasingly embattled regime in South Vietnam. There the British tendered their support, but in a limited way, more limited, perhaps, than Peter Busch suggests. Their answer was the Thompson mission, designed to apply to South Vietnam the lessons of the campaign against Communist subversion in Malaya after 1948. An advisory mission, argued Lord Home, the Foreign Secretary, 'would hearten the Vietnamese and please the Americans, fulfil our SEATO obligations and to that extent encourage the Thais and Filipinos, as well as commending itself to the Malaysians, Australians and New Zealanders. Above all it might just tip the balance against a very

²³ Conversation, 17.8.54. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954*, XII, p. 735.

²⁴ DSE (60) 30 (Final), 3.11.60. CAB 134/1645, National Archives, Kew.

expensive war in which we should all get involved'.²⁵ It was, once more, an involvement to limit involvement.

In 1963 the Foreign Office's South East Asia Department considered the 'upper arc' of Southeast Asia 'peripheral to our interests as a whole'. The UK's objects there were '(i) to contain Communist expansion outside the range of our vital interests further south; (ii) to keep in touch with the Americans, so that we can influence their policy and provide them with a local illustration of the value of our alliance; (iii) to prevent Australia, New Zealand and now Malaysia from believing that we have abandoned them'.²⁶ The British indeed argued that they were committed to the confrontation struggle and that there was thus a division of labour with the Americans. Home, now Prime Minister, agreed to support American policy in Vietnam in return for President Johnson's support for the 'peaceful national independence of Malaysia'.²⁷ But when confrontation ended, no British forces were sent to Vietnam.²⁸

Britain's interests in the 'lower arc' were deeper, but they had also come into question. A Foreign Office memorandum of September 1964 pointed to the decline in Britain's material interests in Southeast Asia, where it now did only 3% of its world trade, and where Malaysia no longer brought a net balance of foreign exchange to the sterling area but was in deficit. Why did it therefore still sustain at Singapore its largest overseas military base?

The reasons were political. The first was 'that the whole area should not slide progressively into a vassal relationship with China and subsequently into communism'. In whatever way the relations of the PRC and SU developed, 'it must remain a major British interest to prevent the decisive change in the balance of world power that would result from the absorption of 230 million people into the Communist system'. That would have an impact on India and Japan, on Australia and New Zealand, and above all on the US and its prestige. The impact would be 'particularly damaging' to Britain if American opinion were able to attribute Communist success in a major degree to Britain's failing in its 'responsibilities'. The second major reason for playing a role in Southeast Asia was indeed 'to contribute effectively to the global Anglo-American partnership and to maintain that influence in the shaping of United States policies that is cardinal to the conduct of our whole foreign policy'. A war started in

²⁵ Quoted in Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 73, 89.

²⁶ Warner/Marsahll, 20.9.63. FO 371/169688 [D 1051/37].

²⁷ Quoted in Easter, p. 83.

²⁸ Geraint Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), p. 62.

Southeast Asia could ultimately imperil the UK. A military presence there was valuable while it enabled Britain to influence US policies.

In the longer term, the memorandum argued, the peace and stability of Southeast Asia required a *modus vivendi*, 'declared or tacit, between the West and the major Communist powers, but especially China'. The aim should be a neutralised Southeast Asia 'allowed to pursue its own destinies without outside interference or commitment'. SEATO would be disbanded. Western military bases only drove nationalism into partnership with communism. Nationalism was 'still the dominant political emotion' in the region, and such a partnership was bound to damage the anti-Communist cause. 'It is also unnatural, in that national particularism—and, in its negative form, anti-Chinese sentiment—is at present the one force that may be able to inhibit the spread of Communist beliefs in the area and to enable an agreed system of neutrality to be established'.

The policy was, however, long-term. Confrontation would have to be ended before the defence treaty with Malaysia was terminated. SEATO would remain 'a necessary short-term symbol of Western resolution in South-East Asia. To seek to jettison it too soon would outrage the Americans and expose the area to demoralisation in the face of the threat of Communist advance from North Vietnam or China.' That threat had to be contained long enough to convince China that the West could not be beaten militarily or by subversion 'without unacceptable effort on the Communist part', and that neutralisation was preferable.²⁹

For the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Jim Callaghan, the long-term was too long-term: 'we cannot afford to behave as we did when we were a wealthy imperial power ... and there is no real economic gain from that part of the world. That being so, our obligations go as far as, but no further than, our duty as good citizens of the world—but we cannot carry that out at the risk of bankrupting ourselves. ... Singapore and South East Asia represent a substantial cost and therefore there must be constant pressure to reduce expenditure in that part of the world.' If Britain had to wait until 'neutralisation' became possible, it would 'endanger a genuine attempt to live within our means'.³⁰ It was not surprising that, after confrontation ended, the UK set a date for leaving Singapore.

The end of confrontation led to the creation of ASEAN in 1967. The association would accommodate Indonesia's justifiable claim to some kind of regional influence while avoiding the need to rely on outside powers for defence against it. With the British withdrawing, and the Americans clearly

²⁹ DO (O) (64) 59, 22.9.64. CAB 148/7.

³⁰ Callaghan/Gordon Walker, 1.1.65. FO 371/180205 [D1051/7].

not going to stay in Vietnam, an association of Southeast Asian nations, agreeing to avoid disputes among themselves, would also provide greater security over against the People's Republic of China (PRC). Association was in a sense a substitute for the intervention of outside powers who had played so large a role in Southeast Asia's past.

It was entirely welcome to the British. The idea that independent states might draw together to provide greater security was compatible with Britain's longstanding concept of a world of nations as well as with its wish to diminish their burdens as a provider of security. The idea of a closer association that the Tunku put forward in 1959 the departments in London considered 'commendable'. He was 'reviving a solution to the political problems of the area which in general we favour.'³¹ The British offered discreet support in the subsequent phases. They were also supportive when Malaysia and Thailand moved on in the Kuala Lumpur declaration of 1971 to advance the idea of neutralising Southeast Asia. 'The aspiration is that at some time in the future the association will extend to include the other five Southeast Asian countries', wrote Sir J. Johnston, High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur: 'and that together the ten will form an area of "peace, freedom and stability" collectively persuading the super powers to remain at a political equidistance which none singly could hope to achieve.'³² With that, Britain recognised that it no longer had a strategic role in Southeast Asia. Had India?

Britain had seen India as an influence and exemplar. That it was no longer. Its international prestige had been damaged by its own military action in occupying Portuguese Goa in December 1961.³³ Its humiliating defeat at the hands of China—inflicted at the height of the US-SU Cuba crisis in retaliation for its 'forward policy' on the frontier—followed in 1962. 'Most of the Afro-Asian neutralists, whose cause Nehru had championed for so long and so eloquently, were awed by China's demonstration of power. They stood mutely neutral instead of rallying to the Indian side, as India expected them to do'.³⁴ If Nehru had undermined his own principles over Goa, their basis was now overthrown. At the same time China developed its relationship with Pakistan. Under such conditions India's capacity for influencing Southeast Asia could only diminish.

³¹ Curwen/Williams, 13.3.59. DO 35/9913 [34], National Archives.

³² Regionalism and Nationalism, Notes for Opening Remarks, ?15.10.73. FCO 24/1530 [59], National Archives.

³³ Harish Kapur, *India's Foreign Policy, 1947–92* (New Delhi: Thousand Oaks; London: Sage, 1994), p. 131.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

The British were disappointed. 'The desirability of getting India to take more interest in South East Asia and the hope that this might ultimately lead to the assumption by India of at least part of the remaining British responsibility in that region has been one of the dominant concepts in the British approach to South East Asia ever since 1947,' a Foreign Office memorandum observed in 1964. But the obstacles had been formidable. Indians were not popular in Southeast Asia. Their commercial, money-lending and middleman activities attracted 'popular odium'. At the government level, Nehru and his representatives had become more and more 'patronising'. The 'undercurrent of resentment' that caused did not much matter as long as Southeast Asian governments were 'impressed by India's potential strength and actual international influence'. That influence was sustained for most of the 1950s. But by the end of the decade, 'Indian ascendancy in Southeast Asia was already being imperilled by the growing strength and influence of China', especially in Burma and Indonesia, and its economic difficulties not only prevented its offering mutual assistance but also cast doubt on its ability to offer a non-Communist path to progress. The decline in influence was 'brutally accelerated by her humiliating defeat at the hands of the Chinese in November 1962,' which had 'profound repercussions' in Southeast Asia.³⁵

Nehru did not want to abandon the policy of non-alignment, and his successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, stayed with it.³⁶ Under Mrs Gandhi and her son, however, India gradually gave up its 'grandiose plans for world peace'.³⁷ Its focus in the next two decades was sub-continental, South Asian. One object was to reduce the opportunities open to China there. 'Much of Indian diplomacy is...geared to the task of monitoring Chinese presence in the region, competing with her northern neighbour in the area, and eroding her influence wherever possible,'³⁸ in Nepal, for example. It went to war with Pakistan more than once. In the early 1970s, reassured by a friendship treaty with China's rival, the SU, it helped to create Bangladesh. In the 1980s it intervened in Sri Lanka. In the eyes of Sunanda K. Dutta-Ray it developed 'an Indian variant of the Monroe Doctrine', and it was characterised as a 'regional bully'.³⁹ SAARC, established in 1985, was slow to develop, given India's poor relations with other members and its comparative 'giantism'.⁴⁰

³⁵ Memorandum, India and South East Asia, [1964]. FO 371/175069 [D1051/99].

³⁶ Lawrence, pp. 240, 245.

³⁷ Swaran Singh, 'China Factor in India's Ties with South-East Asia', in Grave and Matto, p. 195.

³⁸ H. Kapur, p. 103.

³⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

Outside the sub-continent it played a far smaller role, though one affected more than ever by its concern over China. China initially condemned ASEAN. Unsurprisingly India initially supported it. Indeed, before it was set up in August 1967, India had indicated that it would be ready to join the association. Visiting Singapore in May, M.C. Chagla, the Foreign Minister, declared: 'We will be very happy to have bilateral arrangements with Singapore, with regard to trade, commerce, and economic cooperation. But if Singapore chooses to join any regional cooperation, we will be happy to join such a grouping, if other members want India to do so. If others want to have a small grouping, India will be very happy to remain outside and help such a grouping ... India does not want to dominate any regional grouping'.⁴¹

For a while, however, India proved somewhat ambivalent about an organisation that included Thailand and the Philippines, members, along with Pakistan, of the SEATO alliance. For its part ASEAN found the dismemberment of Pakistan disconcerting, and felt that India was facilitating the intrusion of the SU into the Indian Ocean.⁴² India, it noted, failed to condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which it viewed, in the context of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, in 'the most ominous terms'.⁴³ The Kuala Lumpur (KL) declaration and the disbanding of SEATO cleared away some of the obstacles in face of a more positive relationship, but others remained.

The sending of Indian troops to Sri Lanka in 1987 and to the Maldives in 1988 tainted India's image.⁴⁴ There was also concern over the warnings India issued to Fiji about the treatment of the Indians there.⁴⁵ The expansion of the Indian Navy, and reports that it would build a base at Great Nicobar, also worried the maritime members of ASEAN. Port Blair began to be seen not only as a 'stopper' of the Straits of Malacca, but also a 'springboard' into the Straits and even the South China Sea. 'India must show to its neighbours, including Malaysia and other countries in Southeast Asia, that it does not have any ambitions to interfere in regional affairs,' said Ahmad Rithauddeen, Malaysia's Deputy Defence Minister, in 1990. He 'hoped that New Delhi would not go to the extent of flexing its military muscle beyond the Indian Ocean or attempt to control the gateway of the Straits of Malacca'.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴² Kripa Sridharan, 'Regional Perceptions of India', in Grave and Matto, p. 80.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁴⁵ Mak Joon Num, 'ASEAN-India Defence Interactions', in Grave and Matto, p. 154.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 153–154.

The collapse of the SU and the weakening of India's economic position in the early 1990s helped to transform the situation. ASEAN took account of the 'rise' of China, and so did India. It became a sectoral dialogue partner of the ASEAN Regional Forum [ARF] in 1993, a full dialogue partner in 1995, a member, along with China, in 1996. It also forged bilateral defence links with ASEAN countries. But, as Daljit Singh suggested, India was 'effectively contained geopolitically' in South Asia by Pakistan and China, and it would need a dynamic economy and a resolution of the Kashmir dispute to break out of that impasse.⁴⁷ Whether its doing so would benefit ASEAN Mak Joon Num has doubted. Introducing a counter-vailing force in Southeast Asia might provoke an arms race with China.⁴⁸

Strategic interests were most responsible for Britain's interest in Southeast Asia throughout the period. In the nineteenth century the British were concerned about the protection of India, the route to China, the balance of power in Europe. In the first half of the twentieth century, they had an economic interest in Malaya, but their main concern was with Singapore, and its role in the relationship with India and Australia. After the Pacific War, they saw Southeast Asia as a region in which nation-states would counter communism. They sought the involvement of the US, and also sought to demonstrate their value to it more generally, and so to influence its policy against another international war. But they also sought to regulate it through their relationship with India. The results of that had disappointed them. But with the diminution of Britain's role—now that of a 'normal' trading power, though also with the peculiar advantage of originating the world lingua franca—the question of India's role emerged in a new context. That context includes the creation of China's 'ring of pearls'. What role will India now play? How will it affect Malaysia? Can Malaysia's well-practised regional diplomacy affect it?

No more than its British Indian predecessor could independent India tolerate a challenge on the sub-continent itself, and both were also concerned with the security of Burma.

There again the main concern in this phase was with China. The isolation Burma adopted under Ne Win was reduced in the 1980s and India's contacts began to revive, Rajiv Gandhi visiting early in 1988.⁴⁹ That cannot be considered apart from the changes in China's policy, its rapprochement with the US, its adoption of the four modernisations, its attempts to improve relations with the SU, and its bullying of Vietnam in the South China Sea.

⁴⁷ Daljit Singh, 'The geopolitical interconnection between South Asia and South-East Asia', in Grave and Matto, p. 38.

⁴⁸ Mak, pp. 148–149.

⁴⁹ Ayoob, p. 14.

The concerns about China 'led to an increase in India's interest in Southeast Asia, with the objective of finding complementarity of interests with countries of the region in an attempt, among other things, to contain the likely growth of Chinese influence and reach in Southeast Asia', as Ayoob puts it. An increase in China's influence there could possibly embolden it to challenge India 'on the latter's doorsteps in South Asia,' Nepal and Bhutan, or gang up with Pakistan to teach India a 'lesson'.⁵⁰ But Burma, on a frontier now troubled by tribal insurgency, had a special importance.

Seeking to retain power the military regime needed foreign exchange and assistance in suppressing ethnic insurgency. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) junta looked to post-Tiananmen China, and 'began Burma's slide into China's embrace'.⁵¹ With that it abandoned both the isolationism of the Ne Win regime and a much longer tradition of dealing only at arm's length with its great neighbour. It also alarmed India. Whether China's motives were economic or strategic, its influence in Burma and its interest in naval facilities in the Bay of Bengal added another dimension to India's policy towards Southeast Asia.⁵² India's concern led it in 1994 to abandon its policy of isolating the military regime and supporting the anti-SLORC opposition. Belatedly it lent its support to the 'constructive engagement' policy that ASEAN had adopted in 1991.⁵³ But the policy did not succeed in weaning the junta from China, still less in securing a change in the political situation. In 2000 Maung Aye visited New Delhi and in 2001 Jaswant Singh visited what was now called Myanmar.⁵⁴ Tan Shwe visited India in 2004, President Abdul Kalam visited Burma in 2006.⁵⁵ There were attempts to reactivate security dialogue on the frontier and India offered Burma infrastructural assistance.⁵⁶ But this hardly countered the unprecedented position China acquired, extending even to acquiring access to three islands on the shores of the Indian Ocean.⁵⁷ In 2005 India decided to establish its Far East Naval command at Port Blair in the Andamans.⁵⁸

'We shall increasingly become a European power,' the Cabinet Defence Committee said in 1967; 'and our international influence will

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

⁵¹ Mohan Malik, 'Burma's role in regional security', in Morton B. Pedersen, Emily Rudland, and Ronald J. May, *Burma Myanmar Strong Regime Weak State?* (Adelaide: Crawford House, 2000), p. 247.

⁵² Ibid., p. 254.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 255, 257.

⁵⁴ Boquérat, p. 178.

⁵⁵ Jürgen Haacke, *Myanmar's Foreign Policy*, Adelphi Paper 381 (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 55.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 180.

⁵⁷ S.D. Muni, *China's Strategic Engagement with the New ASEAN* (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, NTU, 2002), p. 85.

⁵⁸ Haacke, p. 38.

depend more and more on the soundness of our economy, rather than on our maintenance of a military presence in the rest of the world'.⁵⁹ The resolution of the confrontation struggle and the creation of ASEAN meant that, by the early 1970s, Britain's commitments had been reduced to a residual commitment to the Five-Power Defence Arrangement concluded by the Heath Government in April 1971. In 1977 it defined its priorities with respect to the ASEAN countries: '(a) To expand our exports and protect our investments; (b) To ensure that the governments of the five members of ASEAN remain well-disposed towards the UK and the west generally; (c) To help governments to consolidate internally while improving their human rights performance.' It added: 'Now that the United Kingdom is no longer an imperial power with strategic interests to protect, regional countries are more inclined to regard our assistance and advice as relatively disinterested'.⁶⁰

It was indeed strategic interests that were most responsible for Britain's interest in Southeast Asia throughout the period. In the nineteenth century the British were concerned about the protection of India, the route to China, the balance of power in Europe. In the first half of the twentieth century, they had an economic interest in Malaya, but their main concern was with Singapore, and its role in the relationship with India and Australia. After the Pacific War, they saw Southeast Asia as a region in which nation-states would counter communism. They sought the involvement of the US, and also sought to demonstrate their value to it more generally, and so to influence its policy against another international war.

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⁵⁹ Quoted in S. Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 198.

⁶⁰ Memorandum, British Policy towards the Countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations, 4.11.77. FCO 24/2340 [30].