

# China, Asean and the new Maritime Silk Road

Evolving concepts about South-east Asia and changing Chinese attitudes towards sea power have shaped events that are playing out now in the Sino-US contest over Asean and the broader region. Here are edited excerpts from a keynote speech by eminent historian Wang Gungwu at a recent webinar.

I will begin with Asean in the context of South-east Asia as a region. What is this region? Because that is, to me, central to the whole story. Asean and South-east Asia – the two names are often taken together. But I think we should be very clear that they are very different in many ways. When we talk about South-east Asia, we all know which are the countries we refer to. But for thousands of years while the region has been there, it never had one single identity. Asean is so new – we date from 1967. Some people may say we date it from 1999, when all 10 countries became members of Asean.

"South-east Asia" itself has a name. It was some time during the middle of World War II that the term was used, essentially by strategists for the former empires. Looking at the lands that they were about to leave, how would they maintain any influence in that area? That's the starting point. So they named it "South-east Asia". Having given it a name, books were written. And since then, of course, we've had hundreds of books, thousands of articles, written about this area called "South-east Asia".

## ARRIVAL OF THE EUROPEANS

During that period just before the arrival of the Europeans, the region was taking shape because they were sharing the growing trade, largely led by Muslim traders from the Middle East and traders from southern China, particularly the provinces of Fujian and Guangdong.

These two provinces plus the Middle East, via South India, made this trade a flourishing one for the peoples who lived in this area. The arrival of the Europeans did not change the picture. The Europeans added one more set of actors, whether they were Portuguese, Spanish or later Dutch, and finally the English. The new factor was that the Europeans knew how to fight at sea in more sophisticated and technologically advanced ways than anybody else in the region. And after about 150 years or so, that naval advantage gave them the beginnings of a hegemonic position. Naval power began to dominate the area. And what it meant essentially was that whoever had naval power could actually dominate that trade.

Eventually, the Japanese joined in, and the Chinese traders became partners with some of the European enterprises. They took advantage of opportunities for them to advance their interests. New terms arose both in China and Japan: Nan'yo for the Japanese and Nanyang for the Chinese. Both meant the same, meaning "the Southern Ocean". For the first time, a common name appeared. The name did not really cover the overland northern parts of what we call South-east Asia today. But this one common name led ultimately to the Japanese challenging Western dominance in this part of the world.

## JAPAN ASSERTS ITS DOMINANCE

The Japanese had learnt from the West; they learnt it too well. They shared some of their ambitions, but they also took on the idea that Asia should be for the Asians. There was this idea of an Asianism which was superior to that of the materialist capitalists from the West. Asians had a spiritual civilisation which should be supported, and we should drive these Europeans out of Asia.

Except the Japanese went too far, too fast, and whether they were sincere about really leaving Asia to Asians or whether it was Asia for the Japanese – that was another matter. That led them to start a war that they couldn't win. And that ended their story. But what they did do – and this is the part that we often forget – it was Japan that showed that the whole of South-east Asia could be ruled by one empire. One power could control all of it. And the Japanese did. In fact, if you look around, all the 10 members of Asean today were directly or indirectly under



A drawing of Admiral Zheng He, who led the Chinese navy south to the Indian Ocean. Because of his travels, people think of the Ming period as a time when China expanded its naval influence. Not at all, according to the writer, who says the Ming stopped the navy, destroyed the ships and limited foreign trade. PHOTO: MUZIUM MELAKA

Japanese administration. What became clear was that the Japanese saw a region. Of course, they linked it up with the East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. But they failed. The war ended and they lost everything.

It was during that time that the imperialists knew that after the war things would be different. The British strategists began to look for ways and means of retaining their influence after they were forced to go home and decolonise. The British were realistic enough to see that. And they used the name which they had used in a purely military context – the "South-east Asia Command".

## POST-IMPERIAL VISION

The people within the region were not conscious of it because they had their own problems of nation-building. So the only people who seriously thought about the region were people from the outside, particularly the British strategists, in liaison with the Americans, the French and others, who all came to realise that this was the one way they could protect their interests in a region outside of China and India – the future Asian powers. This was pretty good strategic thinking. These people had imagination and had a long view. It's a mistake to think that Westerners only have a short-term view and that only the Asians and Chinese are long-view people.

Their long view was that this area had to be separated or separately considered and protected, where their interests were concerned, from being dominated by either India or China, or both.

## ZHENG HE AND CHINA'S VIEW OF THE SEA

The Chinese navy under Admiral Zheng He going south and going to the Indian Ocean – that was not something initiated by the Chinese. I would say that had been made possible by the fact that the Mongols had created a regular, very active relationship with the Middle East, with the Mongols expanding overland to the Middle East. The Mongols were reaching out to their own people on the other side, in the Persian Gulf. And so, when the Ming took over from the Mongols after getting rid of them, the Ming inherited that connection. The Yongle emperor took over the Mongol role to find out what was happening in the Mongol empire in the Middle East, and he sent Zheng He out to find out. The net result was at the end of it all, after seven voyages, they decided that it was not worth it. All the British recognise there were enemies out there! And if there

were no enemies out there, why all this expense keeping up this navy? Because of Zheng He, people think of the Ming as a time when the empire expanded its naval influence everywhere. Not at all. They stopped the navy, destroyed the ships and limited foreign trade to foreigners coming to China. Therefore, when the Europeans arrived, the Chinese were nowhere to be seen except as private merchants without naval power or backing from the state. The Opium War and the opening of China transformed the Chinese. For the first time, they were defeated at sea, and the country was endangered from the sea. There were enemies out at sea. And that was a complete shock to the Chinese. But it took them a long time to get going.

By 2000, it was very obvious that the Chinese economy was dependent on maritime trade. But prior to the 1990s, the Chinese were so poor they didn't have the resources to build ships. But within a few decades, people are talking about the Chinese navy as if it were a major threat to the world and all that, which is, to me, absolute nonsense.

The Chinese are building up a lot of ships and supporting forces, but they still have not fought a naval war. As far as I can tell, they have never really won a serious naval battle in the whole of their history. So I would put a question mark over China being a naval power. But nevertheless, they are trying. They are building it because they want to make sure that their coasts are safe, that China can never be threatened or invaded by sea again, and that their maritime routes for their trading needs and so on would be protected in the future. Have they more ambitions beyond that? One cannot be sure. All I can say is, at this stage, all they can hope for is to make sure that they are themselves totally defensible at sea, and their economic dependence on maritime trade could not be threatened by forces hostile to China's development.

## THE NEW MARITIME SILK ROUTE

We do recognise it as new because the old one was very different. The old one didn't involve that many people because travelling by sea, long-distance trade, was still a pretty precarious business. The situation didn't really change until after the 18th century, when all the oceans became open to global domination by a really powerful navy. Genuine globalisation can only be achieved by sea. Then the whole world can come under control. It is quite clear that the Americans and the British still recognise there were enemies out there! And if there

their interests. This is what made them powerful and put them in a position to tell the world how to be modern, how to accept universal values that they had devised and worked out, and how to recognise that this is the way to go in the future. And anybody trying to do it differently is getting it all wrong. These are the messages that we have been getting since the end of World War II. Unlike the British, who were constrained by the fact that they are an island off a continent, the Americans have their own continent. They have no enemies on their continent – no land enemies, nobody to threaten the United States itself – so they could concentrate almost all their resources on building a navy that can control the world.

In this global maritime world, China wants to fit in. But this new maritime route depends on other people's power. The people who can actually control and police this global maritime economy are not an international community – it is Anglo-Saxon naval hegemony. What the Chinese want to be sure of is that in their own neighbourhood, in their own backyard, they must have enough naval power to ensure their country's safety. Because they still have continental problems. They have got 14 different neighbouring states on land. All have to be delicately handled, and some of them are hostile. Naval safety or naval influence is only one part of what they need. America had hoped to be much more influential on land. They thought that they would reduce the influence of Russia if they could get into the Middle East and get total control there. That was one of the reasons why they took the very dangerous moves they have made into the Middle East, right across North Africa and the Middle East into as far as Afghanistan.

## AMERICA'S MARITIME POWER AND CHINA'S BRI

But American adventures on the continent have not succeeded. They are now even more dependent on their maritime supremacy. And I think this is what is very much on the mind of the sole superpower, that is, its "remanent power" as it were, is now maritime. China, on the other hand, has no choice. It has to be both a continental power as well as have an adequate naval defence to look after its existential interests in future economic development. So it is now caught in a very much more complex situation for the first time in history: to be both involved in continental matters as well as maritime matters at the same time. And that's the kind of balance is what it talked about

something that is straightforward. So when you talk about the new Maritime Silk Route, you cannot separate it from the Belt, the continental Belt route, which is to link up to meet the ambitions of the traders overland. And that is not completely a commercial enterprise.

## STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE BELT

The Maritime Silk Route was primarily initiated by commercial interests, with some geostrategic elements drawn into it after it became an umbrella affair by Mr Xi. The continental Belt part of it came from the Chinese recognition that they needed to develop their west – the relationships with all those states that were created out of the Soviet Union in Central Asia. Related to this is the fact that China has this very special relationship with Pakistan after the war with India, and that is a very delicate, extremely expensive and very uncertain relationship. But the Chinese nevertheless developed it. They found that it was not enough to have maritime interests because naval power was not in their hands. Naval power can block off, blockade and contain China to the south, in the South China Sea. So what they needed was extra access to the Indian Ocean. And this is where they are actually doing it via land, not by sea.

They are doing it through Myanmar to Rakhine state. And they are doing it through Pakistan to reach the Indian Ocean so they can get at the oil of Iran in the Middle East. And they are also, in other ways, reaching out to the Mediterranean and farther north, again entirely by land, all the way to the European Union.

In South-east Asia, the BRI includes land routes through Laos, through Thailand to Malaysia and Singapore. And then others simply to Myanmar, to Laos and Cambodia, which do not depend on the sea.

So, the Chinese are not forgetting the fact that dependence on the sea is itself not safe. They have to have many ways to reach out to markets and resources. The new Maritime Sea Route has also to be seen as part of that. Maybe even to the extent of saying they may hope to make some money out of the new Maritime Sea Route to pay for the very expensive land routes which are not going to make them money. To try and get through the whole of Myanmar into Asean, to try and defend the routes to Pakistan from the Hindu Kush to the Indian Ocean – these are not only expensive but also involve very dangerous terrain.

The Chinese are realistic enough to know that it's not going to be a profitable enterprise. That is a strategic commitment to give themselves access to the Indian Ocean should they ever be blocked by sea. These are long-term views.

I do not know whether the efforts will pay off in the end. But you can see that a change in forces in Afghanistan could make many people do a lot of rethinking about what all this would add up to. And this is not unrelated to the new Maritime Sea Route, for whatever resources they have available to invest in it have also got to be weighed against all the new investments and resources put into making it feasible for the land route to be manageable, and be valuable. And I am far from clear that all this would add up with a plus sign on the ledger.

This new Maritime Sea Route has to face the fact that Asean is new, and therefore what happens to us, and how the West looks at Asean, matter tremendously to the Chinese. The rivalry between the US and China means that both sides would like Asean to lean to one side or the other.

And Asean's best bet is to lean to neither. If it can stay that way. But that's far from being a certainty. Both sides will continue to try to at least win some over to themselves. So that will be one of the challenges that will persist. If the Chinese can make sure that Asean remains autonomous and not take sides, I think they will be content to see that as a measure of success. To the US, that may not be enough. But if they can, to China, they would be content if they can keep it that way; they can see that as progress because they had started with Asean established by their rival.

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• National University of Singapore Professor Wang Gungwu was the keynote speaker at a webinar, The New Maritime Silk Road: China And Asean, organised by the Academy of Professors Malaysia. A longer edited transcript of his speech was first published in thinkchina.sg. Lin Yee-ze's English-language e-magazine.