

# South-east Asia's role in a future of civilisational states

China and India are using their past as centres of civilisation to expand their influence. South-east Asia's history confers on it different attributes to shape international relations.

**Tim Winter**

Civilisation has once again become a key term of international affairs. China, India and Turkey are among those that have invoked the idea of the civilisational state to proclaim they hold the values required for 21st-century internationalism, and its leadership.

The United States-China rivalry and the expansion of the Brics (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) grouping also speak of an emerging East-West divide, one that is, in large part, cast in civilisational terms. Civilisation is now becoming a key marker of difference at a time of increasing geoeconomic competition and political tension.

Broadly speaking, civilisations are commonly imagined as historical-cultural zones that can be depicted as regions on maps with historical borders and capitals. In the modern era, states have often claimed a civilisational legacy by identifying a spatial continuity between past and present, often in nationalistic and jingoistic ways.

But in South-east Asia, ideas about civilisational pasts and kingdoms have primarily formed around a language of flows, connections and those historical exchanges that have occurred between and across regions. Significantly, China and India are now increasingly framing their civilisational legacies in such terms as they attempt to build alliances and partnerships across the region.

## THE SILK ROAD RE-IMAGINED

The most notable example of this is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was launched in 2013. Using the concept of the Silk Road to evoke a narrative of shared pasts and futures, China has proclaimed that it is

"reviving" historical cultural, religious, and trade ties across Asia, Africa and Southern Europe. It has extended the Silk Road concept beyond trade to include the Health Silk Road and Digital Silk Road. As part of the BRI, China also promoted a "Dialogue of Civilisations" via several high-level multilateral meetings and a multitude of cultural sector initiatives.

In March, Chinese President Xi Jinping expanded this concept into the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), calling for "tolerance, coexistence, exchanges and mutual learning among different civilisations". The new, re-imagined Silk Road has quickly become one of the key geopolitical and geostrategic imaginaries of the 21st century.

The BRI's Silk Road imaginary recasts civilisation in two notable ways. First, rather than viewing civilisational pasts in terms of regions on maps, the Silk Road narrative of history places emphasis on "civilisational interactions" along certain routes, or through the connections and flow of ideas, goods, and people across continents and oceans.

Second, distinctions between a "unique" Chinese and singular civilisation – that is, humanity – are intentionally blurred. For instance, the GCI is designed to promote the "universal values" of tolerance, peace and harmony required to deal with the global challenges of today.

Not to be outdone, Asia's other pre-eminent civilisational state, India, has invoked its own civilisational narratives to strengthen ties with strategic partners across the Indian Ocean region.

## PROJECT MAUSAM

Project Mausam, which India launched in 2014, is a multilateral strategic alliance for the Indian Ocean which aims to revive a deep history of trade based

around monsoon winds, and a sensibility about the natural environment. Through such initiatives, India is signalling pre-colonial connections and forms of development as the rationale for 21st-century forms of South-South cooperation.

Through their Maritime Silk Road and Project Mausam initiatives, China and India have signalled their eco-civilisational credentials in an attempt to build important platforms of international cooperation around oceans and maritime affairs.

This insertion of civilisational legacies as a "shared heritage" of trans-regional connections into foreign policy architecture opens up opportunities for imagining new narratives about past and future. But while both countries proclaim inclusivity and openness in this language of connectivity, China and India continue to view themselves as civilisational "centres". This raises questions about how smaller countries bordering these "civilisational states" should respond and engage, given the implication that they are often viewed as "lesser", peripheral regions.

## LESSON IN PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

Here, though, South-east Asia has some distinct advantages that enable it to contribute internationally. Connection and exchange lie at the core of the region's history. Understanding South-east Asia in civilisational terms reveals how a history of flows and connections can be

harnessed for peaceful inter-polity ties. The region offers important insights into how different cultural groups can peacefully coexist, regardless of where political borders might be drawn.

Hence, as both China and India proclaim their past offers guidance for addressing global challenges, an understanding of South-east Asia's distinct cultural, religious, and maritime histories also needs to be mobilised. In a region where hierarchies of core and periphery are far less pronounced, insights can be made into the ways in which these buzzwords of contemporary foreign policy, "mutual respect" or "people-to-people dialogue" can be historically substantiated.

South-east Asia's deep cultural and historical interconnections with China and India have created a cultural infrastructure upon which peaceful, mutually beneficial relations can be built across institutions and societal groups.

In East Asia, governments, foundations and universities have long invested in forms of heritage diplomacy that successfully build ties between countries and regions. In South-east Asia, there is significant scope for greater institutional representation and collaboration, such that Asean and government ministries help provide the diplomatic and funding platforms required for meaningful cooperation.

South-east Asia has a distinct contribution to make in shaping how we understand civilisational

legacies and their role in the affairs of the 21st century. It is a region where the past reveals the all-important social and political benefits that arise from defining abstract terms like culture and civilisation in terms of commonalities, rather than differences.

The catastrophic events of this century testify to the dangers of defining civilisations as bounded regions or cultures, whereby lines of division constructed in ideological or religious terms emerge as the contours of violent conflict.

Undoubtedly, new civilisational imaginaries are required for a peaceful century, especially since peaceful internationalism and international cooperation are fundamentally important if we are to address the key challenges of today. In this regard, South-east Asia has much to offer, especially if relations between China and India remain difficult.

• Professor Tim Winter is senior research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore (NUS). He was previously professor and Australian Research Council future fellow at the University of Western Australia, and is author of *Geocultural Power: China's Quest To Revive The Silk Roads For The 21st Century* and *The Silk Road: Connecting Histories And Futures*. This article was first published on the website of the Asian Peace Programme, an initiative to promote peace in Asia housed at the Asia Research Institute, NUS.

