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From Unity to Partition: The Straits of Malacca as a Colonial Divide

Keat Gin Ooi¹

1. Honorary Professor, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Abstract

The Straits of Malacca was, and still is, one of the world's major waterways facilitating East–West trade and sea passage. As such, for centuries it has played a unifying and integrative role in insular Southeast Asia, also known as the “Malay World”, the Malay Archipelago, and *Nusantara*. It has offered a medium for socioeconomically and socio-politically interconnecting the Malay Peninsula with the many islands of the Malay Archipelago, particularly Sumatra and Java. During the ascendancy of Srivijaya and Melaka (Malacca) in the seventh–thirteenth century CE and the fifteenth CE, respectively, the Straits was paramount not only in unifying the Malay Archipelago under these kingdoms' political and economic patronage, but also in overseeing and dominating international maritime trade throughout Southeast Asia. This prominent waterway continued in this role until the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the Straits was accorded a dividing function by two Western colonial powers: Britain and the Netherlands. Acknowledged as the “exclusive Lords of the East”, these imperialist powers transformed the Straits into a colonial divide, with all territories to the north and northeast of this divide falling under the influence of Britain and lands to its south and southeast being controlled by the Netherlands. To avert tensions that could create a pretext for open armed conflict and resolved the perennially contentious issue of Anglo–Dutch tensions, these powers decided on the partition of the Malay Archipelago through the Treaty of London (1824).

This essay shall demonstrate the unifying attributes of the Straits of Malacca from the earliest kingdoms of Southeast Asia until 1824, when the Straits assumed its new function as a Western colonial divide. In this manner, it explains why the previously integrated and unified territorial entities within the Malay World were, as a result of Western imperialism and colonialism, were partitioned into two realms that subsequently produced four nation-states (Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei), each with its particular historical developments and experiences.

Keywords: Straits of Malacca, Malay World, Srivijaya, Melaka, Western imperialism and colonialism, Treaty of London (1824)



1 Introduction

Responding to the geopolitical ramifications of an ongoing situation following the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15), Britain—the “greatest power of the day” (to apply the term of Nicholas Tarling)¹—sought to oust the Dutch in the East Indies² through a treaty in 1824. Pursuant to this treaty, known as the Treaty of London or the Anglo-Dutch Treaty, the Malay Archipelago (comprising present-day southern Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and southern Philippines) was apportioned between the two “exclusive Lords of the East”:³ Britain and the Netherlands. An imaginary plumb line running along the Straits of Malacca (Melaka) designated all territories to the north and northeast of this divide as falling under Britain’s sphere of influence, and all lands to the south and southeast as being ruled by the Netherlands. It was indeed a classic arrangement between nineteenth century Western imperialists in their apportioning of various regions of the world into “spheres of influence” among themselves, primarily to avert tensions and pretexts for open armed warfare. With this proverbial stroke of the pen, the territories of what is contemporary West/Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore came under London’s purview, whilst Indonesia fell under The Hague’s purview. With the conclusion of this paperwork, Anglo–Dutch relations—tense since the seventeenth century, peaking with the infamous Amboyna Massacre (1623)⁴ and again with the opening of an English East India Company (EEIC) outpost on the island of Penang (1786) off the northwest coast of the Malay Peninsula⁵—was finally resolved. From the outset of their respective establishment, the EEIC (1600) and the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC, Dutch United East India Company; 1602) had competed for economic and political hegemony over the greater part of insular Southeast Asia.

In the aforesaid context, the Straits of Malacca was utilized as a divide, a boundary separating two antagonistic Western powers. For the first time in its history, the Strait, one of the world’s major waterways, *functioned as a marker of separation, rather than a unifying medium of interaction* that interconnected

1 Tarling uses this phrase on numerous occasions in his works on British designs in Southeast Asia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See the compendium of Tarling’s writings in Ooi (2012), especially volume I.

2 ‘East Indies’, or ‘Netherlands/Dutch East Indies’ refers to what comprises contemporary Indonesia.

3 This term was coined by British Foreign Secretary George Canning in reference to Britain and the Netherlands.

4 The execution of some twenty men, half of whom served the EEIC, by the Dutch on Ambon Island in Maluku (the Spice Islands), was the turning point for EEIC’s withdrawal from the spice trade in the East Indies, after which it focused on the Indian sub-continent.

5 ‘Malay Peninsula’ comprises modern day West/Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore.

the Malay Peninsula with the various islands of insular Southeast Asia, particularly Sumatra and Java. This post-1824 role as a ‘colonial divide’ set into motion disparate historical development in these two territorial realms, each adhering to its respective colonial dictates. Analogically, the ‘twins’—British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies—who had been interrelated since ‘birth’ had been separated to be raised by two distinct guardians: Britain and the Netherlands, each with its own philosophy, temperament, personality, characteristics, and ‘child rearing’ practices.

This paper shall explore the unifying attributes of and role played by the Straits of Malacca from the dawn of the earliest kingdoms of Southeast Asia until the 1820s, when it was appropriated as a Western colonial divide. In doing so, it explains how previously integrated and unified territorial entities within the ‘Malay World’ were, as a result of Western imperialism and colonialism, were partitioned into two realms that have since become four nation-states (Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei), each with its particular historical developments and experiences.

2 The Maritime ‘Silk Road’

On land, long-distance trade had commenced as early as the first century BCE. Famously known as the Silk Road, this trade route stretched from China in the east to Central and West Asia and the Mediterranean and Europe in the west. It is well recognized that the trade in luxuries⁶ (hence the name Silk Road, from China’s fabulous fabric) spurred the establishment of further networks of trade routes across Eurasia, linking the civilizations of the Orient with the Occident, Han-dynasty China (206 BCE–220 CE) with the Roman empire (27 BCE–476 CE). Rome’s acquisition of Egypt in 30 BCE spread *Pax Romana* to West Asia, which in turn facilitated further West–East trade. However, even at the most peaceful times, this trade route was undoubtedly a dangerous one, imbued with all kinds of risks: harsh and unforgiving terrain, uncompromising weather conditions, ever-present hordes of marauders, and avaricious local rulers.

6 The flow of luxury goods on the Silk Road was essentially from China to the West. Travelling along this road were silk, ceramics (china), aromatics, and precious stones from China; fabrics, spices, sandalwood, semi-precious stones, dyes, and ivory from South Asia; gold and silver, semi-precious stones and glass items from Central Asia; dates, saffron powder and pistachio nuts from Persia, glass bottles from Egypt, fragrances, frankincense and myrrh from Somalia. See Bentley (1993).



Beginning in the second century CE, there was apparently a steady decline in the utilization of this overland trading network. This could be attributed to two prominent developments: the instability of the Kushan Empire due to incursions from tribal hordes, and the collapse of the Eastern Han Dynasty. The Kushans, based in Bactria (later in Kabul), one of the prominent stations on the Silk Road, dominated the greater part of Central Asia and northern India, controlling of what is today Afghanistan, Pakistan, and most of north-western India. Meanwhile, the demise of the Han Dynasty precipitated the Three Kingdoms era (220–280 CE), wherein Chinese territories were divided between three separate antagonistic powers: Cao Wei (Luoyang), Eastern Wu (Nanjing, Yangtze, and south), and Shu (Sichuan). The Eastern Wu Dynasty (221–280 CE), located far to the south, was denied access to the Silk Road by both the Cao Wei and Shu Kingdoms. As such, to meet the demand of luxuries from the West, its rulers sought alternative options: overland, via Myanmar (formerly Burma), or oversea, through the coastal port-city of Guangzhou (once known as Canton). This boosted trade efforts between Guangzhou and Oc-Eo in the lower Mekong River Delta (present-day An Giang Province, Vietnam). Here, in what is believed to have been a busy port in the ancient kingdom of Funan (first to seventh century CE), Chinese goods were exchanged for products from the ‘West’, namely the Indian sub-continent, southwest Asia, eastern Africa, and eastern Mediterranean.

Oc-Eo represented the eastern terminus of the peninsular portage route across the Isthmus of Kra. Trade goods that landed at ports along the eastern coasts of the Gulf of Siam were transported overland to the western shores of the isthmus, where awaiting ships transported them across the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal to India and Sri Lanka.⁷ From the Indian ports of Arikamedu, Kaverippumpattinam, and Madurai on the Coromendal Coast, goods were transferred via coastal shipping to ports, such as Nelkunda, Muziris, Kalligeris, Suppara, and Barygaza and Barbaricum, along the western Malabar Coast.⁸ Thereafter, goods were shipped on vessels headed either towards the Persian Gulf (Babylon, Seleucia) or towards the Red Sea (Leuke Kome, Berenice, Coptos, Myos Hormos, Alexandria) and onward. Trade goods from Southeast Asia itself, especially from the Malay Archipelago, were already making their way to Oc-Eo during this early period (c. first century CE), carried on native vessels captained by skillful Malay seamen.

7 For details of this trans-peninsular trade route, see Jacq-Hergoualc'h & Hobson (2002); Wheatley (1961).

8 For first century CE maritime trade routes, see Hall (1985).

Even at its best, the trans-peninsular overland trade route was a formidable obstacle course. Thick equatorial rainforests, treacherous fast flowing rivers, and hilly terrain presented formidable and perilous natural conditions that increased the risk and cost of transporting fragile and bulky luxury trade goods. These obstacles, nigh insurmountable, dissuaded usage of this isthmian passage, which became increasingly obsolete as traders began relying on a maritime route that rounded the Malay Peninsula (via the Straits of Malacca) before entering the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. By the fifth century CE, the trans-peninsular overland trade route had fallen into disuse (Miksic, [1999](#)).

3 The Straits of Malacca: A Pivot in the Maritime ‘Silk Road’

Scholars believe that the peoples of Southeast Asia discovered bronze and developed sophisticated metal technology independently, and through their own ingenuity (White & Hamilton, [2009](#); Glover, [2015](#)). It is acknowledged that, by 200 BCE, many Southeast Asians were using bronze, brass, tin, and iron into tools, weaponry, utensils, and ritual ornaments. The most celebrated example are beautifully crafted bronze ceremonial drums, which are believed to have originated from Dong-son in modern Vietnam. Significantly, that “these drums were so widely dispersed throughout the region is clear evidence that *there existed an extensive and efficient exchange mechanism within the Southeast Asian world* [emphasis added] prior to any significant trade with imperial India or China” (Hall, [1993](#), p. 185).

The exchange of products amongst the inhabitants of Southeast Asia was undoubtedly undertaken both overland and overseas. Shipbuilding skills must have been sophisticated, and sailors must have developed adaptive sailing techniques to master the treacherous rivers and the open ocean, thereby enabling them to trade both within and without the region. This includes, importantly, the rhythm of the seasonal monsoon winds; between November and February, the northeast monsoon asserts its influence, bringing rain to the region, while from June to August the prevailing southwest monsoon ushers in a dry season. This pattern is not only crucial in the agricultural cycle, but also pivotal in dictating the movements of sailing ships in the region: hence the sobriquet, “lands below the winds”.



And who were these early skillful and knowledgeable seafarers in the Straits' region? The *Orang Laut*, in Malay meaning “sea people”, who—until the nineteenth century—dominated “much of the maritime zone surrounding the Straits of Melaka, including parts of the east Sumatran coast and the islands of the Riau-Lingga and Pulau Tujoh groups” (Sather, [2004](#), p. 1000). They were largely responsible for the carrying trade throughout the region and abroad.

Drawing from archaeological evidence, it is generally acknowledged that there were functional trading sites on the coast and rivers along the Malay Peninsula (what is now West/Peninsular Malaysia) by the first millennium BCE. These posts were differentiated into three functional categories: ‘collecting centers’, ‘feeder points’, and ‘entrepôts’ (Leong, [1990](#)). These trading sites facilitated the growth of maritime trade from the South China Sea in the east to the Bay of Bengal in the west, viz. collecting centers drew products from its hinterlands for long-distance east-west trade; entrepôts offered rendezvous points where gathered merchants landed, repackaged, and reshipped their goods to other lands; and feeder points literally fed the entrepôts and collecting centers with specific products mined from their immediate hinterlands.

In the aforesaid trading activities, the Straits of Malacca acted as a ‘connector’, enabling traders from East Asia to interact with their counterparts from South, West, and Southeast Asia. During this early period, the Straits was already an important conduit of East–West trade, playing a unifying role that remained evident until the early nineteenth century.

As mentioned earlier, seasonal monsoon winds were among the Strait’s foremost natural advantages. Almost like clockwork, “the northeast monsoon took ships down into the Straits of Melaka from China or India. They would then be becalmed during the transition period between the two monsoons until the southwest monsoon allowed them to continue their journey” eastwards or westwards (Cleary, [2004](#)).

This pattern of wind circulation facilitated the comings and goings of merchants, enabling long-distance maritime trade to flourish and the trading sites to be established. As trading sites progressed and prospered, they developed structures of governance to oversee their varied and complex commercial intercourses, their growing immigration populations, and the inevitable task of maintaining a peaceful and stable environment conducive to trading activities (both on land and at sea). In this manner, various trading sites transformed themselves into littoral or riparian trading states (Bronson, [1978](#)).

4 Trade and Hegemony Over the Strait

1. The Malay Srivijaya–Melaka Model

Two major historical epochs demonstrate the unifying attributes of and the roles played by the Straits of Malacca: the Malay trading polities of Srivijaya and Melaka (Malacca), which respectively dominated the Straits of Malacca and international maritime trade in Southeast Asia between the seventh and thirteenth century CE and in the fifteenth century CE. These kingdoms unified the realms around the Straits of Malacca and beyond under their political and economic patronage.

At its zenith, Srivijaya, situated on the lower reaches of the Musi River in the vicinity of what is now Palembang, was the preeminent power over the Sunda Strait, the Straits of Malacca, the Malay Peninsula, the Isthmus of Kra, the Menam Delta (northwards to Lavo), the Mekong Delta (stretching inland to Indrapura), central and southern Sumatra, western and central Java, and to a lesser extent, across the Java Sea to the southwest coast of Borneo. In 682 CE, the Malay Buddhist Srivijaya (Sanskrit for ‘auspicious victory’) established unquestioned dominance over southern Sumatra by absorbing the Malay Hindu kingdom of Malayu, located on the adjacent Batang Hari River Basin. As with Malayu, Srivijaya’s political and economic power was derived only partly from its naval might. More important were this Malay thalassocracy’s mutual alliances and loyalty purchases (Drakard, [2004](#)); undoubtedly, the rulers of Srivijaya used royal curses and the threat of royal retribution to secure the support, cooperation, and loyalty of the Orang Laut (Hassan Shuhaimi bin Nik Abdul Rahman, [1990](#)).

During its ascendancy, Srivijaya was the leading entrepôt in Southeast Asia. At the same time, it allowed secondary or sub-regional entrepôts to exist and continue to partake in seaborne trade. “The local entrepôts”, it became apparent, “would have been allowed to retain a substantial part of their independent status as long as they paid homage and rendered the commercial services required of them by Srivijaya” (Hassan Shuhaimi bin Nik Abdul Rahman, [1990](#), p. 69).⁹ Its reliance on the peculiar structure of vassal-client relations, “an intricate web of kinship, political, and familial ties; ultimately, by the understanding that everybody was sharing a common interest—*trade above all*”, thus explained Srivijaya’s undisputed grip over its vast domain (Munoz, [2006](#)).

⁹ Also, see Munoz ([2006](#)).



The long-distance trade in luxuries was the mainstay of Srivijaya's commercial prowess, proving the necessity and providing justification for its extended maritime realm. Much valued in the Chinese market were three products from the equatorial rainforest of Southeast Asia: benzoin, camphor, and *ju*, a resin used for medicinal purposes (Wolters, 1967; Wang, 1958; Wheatley, 1959). Responding to this economic demand, it was prudent for Srivijaya to extend its hegemony over the centers whence these forest products came. At the same time, this Malay thalassocracy had to ensure that local and regional trade within Southeast Asia was maintained, and that all concomitant stakeholders—i.e. the vassal states and polities that controlled collecting centers, feeder points, and entrepôts; shippers and their crews; traders and commercial agents—mutually benefitted from trade.

Under Srivijaya, the Straits of Malacca provided a unifying 'sea', not dissimilar to the Mediterranean. Together with lucrative long-distance trade on the maritime Silk Road were the all-important local and regional trade networks that connected the region's various collecting centers, feeder points, and entrepôts. While its geographical location strategically positioned Srivijaya in overseeing East–West seaborne trade traffic through the Straits of Malacca, it was facilitated by this Malay Buddhist thalassocracy's ability to weave and sustain the support, cooperation, and loyalty of vassal and subordinate polities, which were brought together by the profits gained from commerce.

Furthermore, as a center for Mahayana Buddhist learning, Srivijaya attracted pilgrims from throughout East and South Asia, most famously the Chinese Buddhist monk I-Tsing, who initially sojourned there in 671 CE. Pilgrim traffic between China and India further enhanced the Straits of Malacca's significance in bringing religious adherents to Srivijaya for study and/or a temporary rest before continuing onwards.¹⁰

Similarly, in the fifteenth century CE, during the ascendancy of the Malay Muslim Melaka Sultanate, the Straits of Malacca again provided a unifying force rooted in commercial entrepôt-ship and religion. To a large extent, Malay Muslim Melaka replicated Malay Buddhist Srivijaya in both its economic supremacy and religious primacy, albeit with Sunni Islam replacing Mahayana Buddhism. Throughout the fourteenth century, "the Straits of Malacca area, long the stronghold of the Srivijaya Empire, was contested between the Javanese, Chinese, Tai and local Sumatran forces" (Reid, 1993, p. 203). Melaka was borne from the struggles between rival claimants to hegemony over the Straits of Malacca.

10 "By the seventh-century," when I-Tsing visited Srivijaya, "it was viewed as an important stopping point prior to one's entry into China, not only because it was an important commercial entrepôt but also because it had become an important religious center for Buddhist pilgrims." (Hall, 1985, p. 37).

The beginning of the fifteenth century witnessed the emergence of a ‘second Srivijaya’ on the central western coast of the Malay Peninsula. Melaka, which lent its name to the strait that it dominated for the greater part of the fifteenth century, developed and maintained its hegemony following the Srivijayan model. As with its predecessor, Melaka’s naval force was essential in enforcing its will, but not fundamental in its success as a great, if not the greatest, entrepôt in the region. Rather, Melaka’s ascendancy was based in establishing strong and sustainable vassal-client relations with various collecting centers, feeder points, and entrepôts.

[Fundamentally,] what mattered was the structure of vassal-client relations, structured as much by mutual economic self-interest as by the force of naval power. [Hence] cooperation with the important groups of the islands and estuaries of the straits was vital to the success of the [Melaka]. (Chuan & Cleary, [2000](#), pp. 89–90)

Through a combination of imposed vassal-client relations, Islamic conversions, conquests, and political marriages, Malay Muslim Melaka achieved and maintained a tight grip over the Straits of Malacca. This, in turn, enabled it to regulate and dominate the maritime East–West trade for more than a century. At the zenith of its power, “It is evident that the [Melakan] kingdom as a whole constituted a galactic, patrimonial-style state” (Sandhu & Wheatley, [1983](#), p. 509). Melaka exerted its hegemony from its core (its port-city), radiating its power to northward to Kelantan on the peninsula and Rokan on Sumatra, as well as southward to Tungkal and Lingga (Sandhu & Wheatley, [1983](#)). Like Srivijaya, Melaka unified the Straits region under its sphere of influence. However, it went one step further, not only binding the region economically (through the vehicle of trade) but also religiously and socio-culturally.

After the Portuguese captured Melaka, no port-city or polity along the Straits was able to become an economic and/or religious pivot. In other words, the era in which a Malay state exerted unchallenged dominance over the Straits and united nearby regions had passed. Thereafter, the Straits became a fragmented sea in which numerous competing powers vied for hegemony.

2. A Three-Pronged Struggle for the Strait

Between the Portuguese capture of Melaka (1511) and the opening of Penang (1786) as a British outpost, no singular power was able to fully assert total command of the Straits of Malacca. Instead, there was internecine conflict and attrition struggles among contending rivals, resulting in intermittent armed naval clashes (Borschberg, [2010](#); Pinto, [2012](#)). Pretenders to Melaka abounded in the next three centuries, but all paled in comparison.



Despite capturing Melaka in 1511 and forcing the last Malay Muslim ruler and his royal court to flee, the Portuguese failed to replicate the kingdom's previous success. The Portuguese did not automatically 'inherit' the trade network that their predecessor had successfully built up, nurtured, and benefitted. Moreover, they were unable to secure vassal-client relations in the region, and it was apparent that they would never be able to capitalize from shared religious, ethnic, and/or socio-cultural affinities with native polities. Having assumed Melaka's natural physical attributes, the Portuguese were unable to attract merchants, the majority of whom were Muslim. Further compounding matters, the Portuguese attempted to further their religious mission in venturing East, spreading Catholicism as a means of undermining their Muslim enemies.¹¹ However, the promotion of Catholicism in a Muslim 'lake' (i.e. the Straits of Malacca) was at best a fruitless endeavor and, at worse, only created more detractors (Andaya & Ishii, [1993](#)). Consequently, most Muslim traders avoided Portuguese Melaka, instead patronizing other Muslim port-cities in the Straits, notably Aceh on the north-western tip of Sumatra. Nonetheless, for some merchants economic pragmatism often overruled religious fervor (Andaya, [1993](#)).

Portuguese Melaka's sustained economic existence relied heavily on coercion, with ships being required to call on the port-city and to pay anchorage charges and customs duties on all commodities except foodstuffs (Villiers, [2004](#)). Naval power was therefore essential, as were escorts for ships travelling to Maluku to collect highly demanded spices.

For the greater part of the sixteenth century, Portuguese Melaka filled the royal coffers of Lisbon. Spice shipments as well as profits peaked during the 1570s and 1580s, and the revenue earned from Melaka was estimated to be quadruple the internal revenue of Portugal itself (Reid, [1993](#)). As such, the profits derived from Portugal's near monopoly on the European spice trade made Melaka a prized possession. Portuguese naval forces, in conjunction with the A Famosa Fortress, were thus required to save the port-city from enemy sieges and assaults several times.

Ultimately, Portuguese Melaka's prosperity was unsustainable. In the early decades of the seventeenth century, it was apparent that decline had begun. The incessant need for ships and men to enforce Portuguese Melaka's will—forcing ships to call at Melaka, maintaining an effective naval force, fleet of cargo ships, and escorts—was increasingly taxing and untenable.

¹¹ From the Portuguese standpoint, "trade and religion were two sides of the same coin; to deprive the Arabs of trade profits and to kill them as enemies of Christianity" (Sardesai, [1994](#), p. 60).

Furthermore, profits for the royal exchequer were compromised by private trading on the side-line by avaricious Portuguese officials. At the same time, missionary activities were undermining goodwill and fueling anti-Portuguese feelings throughout the surrounding territories. An increasing number of merchants in general, and Muslims in particular, avoided Portuguese Melaka in favor of friendlier and less exacting ports-of-call such as Kedah, Perak, and Johor on the Peninsula and Aceh, Aru, Siak, and Indragiri on Sumatra. Brunei, on northeast Borneo, was another Muslim trading port that welcomed Muslim traders.

In the mid-seventeenth century, the Acehnese began challenging Portuguese Melaka for hegemony over the Straits of Malacca and launched a series of naval assaults. In the south, Malay Johor-Riau renewed its ambition to re-capture Melaka, the former seat of Malay power and ethnic pride. The Straits were thus fragmented into three competing zones of influence, viz. Aceh in the north, Portuguese Melaka in the center, and Johor-Riau in the south. This struggle for control of the Straits, however, had no apparent winner, instead weakening all contenders.

By the sixteenth century CE, Aceh—located on the north-western tip of Sumatra from which it could command entry into the Straits from the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal—was an emerging power. The Portuguese capture of Melaka had benefitted Aceh, as Muslim merchants sought alternative ports-of-call and passage to avoid this Catholic newcomer. Aceh was further enriched by a decision made by the Islamic kingdom of Demak, in central Java, to travel westward via the Strait of Sunda and western coast of Sumatra. Spurred by this development, Aceh began flexing its muscles, gaining dominance over Sumatra's north-eastern coast (including several pepper ports).

Under the rule of Sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607–36), who adopted the pretentious title of 'Mahkota Alam' (lit. 'Crown of the Universe', implying 'Universal Ruler'), Aceh enjoyed a golden era (Tjandrasasmita, [2004](#)). However, the death of Sultan Iskandar Muda and brief reign of Sultan Iskandar Thani (r. 1636–41) precipitated Aceh's decline in power and influence over its domain and the northern approach to the Straits. This was complicated by Melaka's fall into the hands of the VOC in 1641.

The Portuguese capture of Melaka had seen the flight of the Malay sultan and his royal entourage. Owing to continued Portuguese harassment and Acehnese assaults, these royal refugees relocated first to the Johor River estuary then to the offshore island of Bintan (Bentan) in the Riau Archipelago. When the Malays finally regained their strength, with assistance from the steadfastly loyal Orang Laut, this resulted in the rise of the Johor–Riau Empire.



Of the empire's adversaries, Aceh posed the greatest threat. Nonetheless, even as their base on the Johor River was repeatedly attacked by the Acehnese, viz. 1564–5, 1613, and 1615, the Malays' resolve did not falter; Johor-Riau again and again resurrected its power and challenged Portuguese Melaka and Aceh, both of whom it regarded as 'usurpers'. Like Aceh, Batu Sawar (c. 1587–1615) on the Johor River estuary, offered itself as an alternative to Portuguese Melaka for Muslim merchants (Borschberg, [2011](#)).

In the last quarter of the seventeenth century, after the Dutch capture of Melaka in 1641 and subsequent decline of Aceh, Malay Johor-Riau finally became a semblance of its predecessor. The Malays lent assistance to the VOC, which succeeded in unseating Johor-Riau's erstwhile nemesis and thereby realized the Malays retribution for their defeat in Melaka. In return, the Dutch provided "special trade and political privileges" to Johor-Riau, thereby enabling it to "become a major entrepôt much in the style of its predecessor, the kingdom of Melaka" (Andaya, [2004](#), p. 699).

Nonetheless, no power could fully assert its dominance over the Straits of Malacca, which remained the premier maritime route for international East-West trade. During their respective ascendancies, Portuguese Melaka, Aceh, and Malay Johor-Riau all profited from trade in the Straits. This trade remained the common denominator amongst the three contenders. Paradoxically, however, it was not the Portuguese, the Acehnese, or the Malays that reaped the long-term benefits of this struggle. Instead, two new players—the VOC and EEIC—were the true beneficiaries of these efforts to gain hegemony over the Straits.

3. "And the twain shall *not* meet": Dutch Monopoly and English Country Trade

The beginning of the seventeenth century witnessed the entry of new players in the Straits of Malacca, viz. English and Dutch traders, respectively under the aegis of the EEIC and VOC. The former's presence, however, was short-lived, for after the mid-1620s the English withdrew from insular Southeast Asia except for Bengkulu (Bencoolen, established in 1685), a trading port on the west coast of Sumatra. Until the opening of Penang, off the northwest coast of the Malay Peninsula, in 1786, the seventeenth-century Straits of Malacca resembled a 'Dutch lake'—with qualifications, i.e. the Bugis migrants who developed into significant economic and political players (and a thorn-in-the-side to the Dutch).

VOC's mercantile intention was to impose a monopoly over key commodities in the East Indies and their European trade. The Dutch sought full control of the production, collection, shipment, and marketing of major commodities, chiefly cloves and nutmeg in Maluku and pepper in Sumatra. Maluku, the famed 'Spice Islands', was the VOC's primary focus in its first two decades. Although being headquartered in Ambon, the 'heart' of the spice-producing islands, enabling the VOC to readily oversee production, collection, and shipment, it was inconveniently 'off' the international maritime trade routes between South and East Asia, where the Dutch also had vested interests.¹² Melaka was an alternative, but at the time it was under Portuguese rule; meanwhile, the Dutch in Banten, West Java, had to deal not only with an uncompromising local potentate but also competition from Chinese and English traders. The VOC also had a trading post in nearby Jayakarta (Jacatra, present-day Jakarta).

Meanwhile, to acquire a piece of the lucrative spice trade the EEIC had negotiated with local rulers and established trading posts in southwest Borneo (Sukadana), Sulawesi (Makassar), Java (Banten, Jayakarta, and Jepara), and Sumatra (Aceh, Pariaman, and Jambi), much to Dutch exasperation and anguish. The English advocacy of a free market challenged the VOC's concerted attempt to dominate all stages in the spice trade. Ultimately, in 1619 VOC Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen (t. 1617–23)—having failed to secure a monopoly over the pepper trade in Banten—decided to relocate his headquarters to recently-seized Jayakarta. Coen renamed the city Batavia (Betawi) and used it as his seat for overseeing the establishment of the future Dutch East Indies.

The short-lived Anglo–Dutch truce (1620–3), signed in Europe, did not deter the English from challenging VOC rule whilst in Batavia or from trying to break the VOC's monopoly over Banda (van der Eng, [2004](#)). Increasing Dutch pressure, as well as stiff competition in the spice trade and geopolitical considerations within the court of King James I (1566–1625), prompted the EEIC Directors in London to consider a withdrawal from the East Indies. At the time, England was backing the Dutch in their struggle to throw off the yoke of Hapsburg Spain; to a large extent, a Dutch victory would guarantee England's security against a dominant power on the continent (Tarling, [2004](#)). The 1623 massacre in Ambon accelerated the English withdrawal, which in turn allowed the Dutch free reign over trade in the East Indies.

¹² Besides the East Indies, the VOC also had trading interests with Bengal (India) and Nagasaki (Japan). See Prakash ([1985](#)) and Suzuki ([2012](#)) respectively.



Having achieved dominance over the Sunda Strait, it was only prudent that the Dutch should assert control over the Straits of Malacca. As such, the VOC allied with Malay Johor-Riau to remove the Portuguese from Melaka, a successful campaign that concluded in early 1641. Having seized Melaka, the Dutch soon realized that control over this port-city would not in-and-of itself automatically guarantee to the flow of commodities from the region's numerous collecting centers, feeder ports, and entrepôts (i.e., the traditional trading networks that had been built and sustained by Malay Buddhist Srivijaya and Malay Muslim Melaka). Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Dutch Melaka's revenues were barely able to keep up with its expenditures. These diminishing economic returns could also be traced to an overall shift in the locus of seaborne trade; Batavia was gaining increased importance, and the Sunda was proving to be an important and viable alternative trade route (Lewis, [2009](#)).

The local indigenous networks in the Straits of Malacca remained intact throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as did the mutually beneficial interactions between coastal ports and producers on the interior. The VOC, desiring to establish, nurture, and sustain a symbiotic relationship that benefitted all parties involved, sought to tap into this network by establishing relations with native states. Traditional economic players in the Straits—the Acehnese, Malays, Minangkabaus, Indian Muslims, Chinese, Javanese, and Orang Laut—thus remained active and relevant. Aceh, the Johor-Riau Empire, and smaller coastal states and ports along and across the Straits survived and benefited from the seaborne flow of trade.

In the last quarter of the seventeenth century, another player rose to prominence in the Straits: the Bugis, who were already known as accomplished seafarers, traders, and warriors. The Dutch, failing to monopolize the trade of spices (nutmeg, cloves, and mace) in the Makassarese kingdom of Gowa (Goa), South Sulawesi, had enlisted the assistance of Bone and defeated Gowa in 1669. In return for the monopoly they desired, the Dutch acknowledged Bone as the sole ruler of South Sulawesi. This led many Bugis from subdued Gowa to flee, migrating and settling throughout the western Malay Archipelago, viz. Java, Sumatra, and the southern parts of the Malay Peninsula (Pelras, [1996](#)).

By becoming involved in peninsular politics, especially in Johor-Riau and Selangor, the Bugis entrenched their presence. Their success over the Minangkabau-Orang Laut alliance was rewarded with ascendancy in the political and economic spheres, where they supplanted the Malay elites and Orang Laut, respectively (Andaya, [1992](#); [2004](#)).

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Straits of Malacca remained—as in the preceding centuries—a unifying force, one that derived its power from the trading links and political ties of peoples on both shores. In the estuaries, coasts, and islands along and in the vicinity of the Straits, *nakhoda* (ship captains) of Malay, Orang Laut, Acehnese, and Bugis descent continued the centuries-old practices of small-scale, short-distance, coastal trade, thereby creating and strengthening traditional economic, socio-cultural, and political linkages. Neither the displacement of the Portuguese at Melaka, or nor the rise of Bugis influence in the Johor-Riau Empire, was able to significantly affect indigenous coastal and regional trade networks or the vassal–client relations between the larger entrepôts and their subordinate ports.

However, this situation gradually began changing after the English opened a trading post in Penang, at the northeast entrance of the Straits. The EEIC had established lucrative trade with China at the end of the seventeenth century, enjoying limited access to the ports of Guangzhou, Xiamen, and Zhoushan through its ‘factory’ (trading post, established 1672) on Formosa (Taiwan) (Wild, [2000](#); Van Dyke, [2007](#)). Three decades later, this cross-straits arrangement was discarded in favor of a factory in Guangzhou itself, where English merchants—though subjected to severe restrictions and prohibitive trading terms—traded English woollens and Indian cottons for priced tea, porcelain (chinaware), and silk.

When Chinese demand for English products decreased, however, trade had become seriously imbalanced. Opium—traditionally used in Chinese medicines—was used to stem the outflow of silver while increasing profits (Greenberg, [2008](#)). English merchants handled its transportation, while the EEIC oversaw opium production in its plantations in India. Even after an imperial edict proscribed the import and sale of this widely abused drug in 1729, an unholy alliance of corrupt Qing provincial officials, avaricious *co-hong* (merchant guild), and foreign (including English) merchants prevailed. Capital punishment, implemented by Beijing as part of its prohibition, was incapable of deterring their search for indecently high profits.

From the eighteenth century onward, trade to China was carried out by English country traders—private individuals who used their own vessels for trading activities outside the Indian sub-continent (Lewis, [2009](#)). This practice was fully approved, recorded, and taxed. As the EEIC’s China trade picked up in the mid-eighteenth century, merchants began venturing further eastwards, to the East Indies, in search of goods that might be prove valuable in the Chinese market, viz. exotic jungle and sea products prized for their medicinal (often aphrodisiac properties), and/or as culinary delicacies.



Prior to the opening of Penang in 1786, an EEIC trading outpost on the eastern shores of the Straits, Riau—the base of the Johor-Riau Empire—was an important rendezvous for English country traders. Under Bugis aegis since the 1760s, Riau developed into the premier entrepôt of the southern Straits of Malacca. “The natural advantages of Riau,” as pointed out, “were now reinforced by widespread trading network set up by the Bugis within the [Malay] Archipelago” (Lewis, [1995](#)). Initially trading in the traditional tropical products of the surrounding hinterlands (spices and jungle products), from the mid-eighteenth century tin, pepper, and gambier became increasingly important; tin and gambier mainly for Western markets, and pepper mainly for the Chinese market. Riau’s strategic location, halfway between China and India, minimal restrictions, and low taxes and dues allowed Bugis Riau to remain an attractive regional center for East–West trade for the greater part of the eighteenth century.

Increased trade with China resulted in country traders gaining increased prominence, radically transforming the character and players of local and regional trade in and around the Straits and beyond (Lewis, [1970](#)). When country traders procured goods from local producers in exchange for Western ones, they became intermediaries between short-distance, coastal trade and long-distance, international trade. They increasingly assumed the pivotal and profitable role that had traditionally been played by Chinese and Malay middlemen, with adverse implications (particularly for the latter). By the early nineteenth century, Westerners dominated both regional and international trade in the Straits.

Recognizing the significance of country trade, the perennial rivals EEIC and VOC both undertook strategic moves in the 1780s. Seeing the prosperity of Bugis Riau, the Dutch captured the port in 1784, thereby politically and economically emaciating the Bugis. However, the Dutch failed to replicate the combined skills and entrepreneurship that had enabled the Bugis, Malays, and Chinese to guarantee Riau’s pre-eminence. In fact, Dutch intervention sealed Riau’s fate: “The Batavian government”, it appeared, “was determined that Riau would never again act, as it had from 1761 to 1784, as a center for the English country trade in the Archipelago” (Lewis, [1995](#); Vos, [1990/1993](#)).

Meanwhile, the EEIC was pursuing the idea of establishing a permanent base in the vicinity of the Straits (Bassett, [1964](#)). Dutch Melaka and Batavia possessed control over the central and southern parts of the Straits, and thus English vessels plying the India–China trade route were at the mercy of Dutch ports for re-provisioning and repairs. At the same time, there were strategic considerations, for “the geopolitical situation then in Southeast Asia witnessed the increasing ascendancy of Dutch hegemony over the Malay Archipelago; French ambitions in Burma, Annam, and Cochin China; and Austrian interest in Acheh, alarming the EIC” (Ooi, [2004](#), p. 1048). On his part, Sultan Abdullah

Muharum Shah (1773–1798) of Kedah “was equally anxious to seek military assistance against his Siamese overlord. Siam was on the verge of being invaded by Burma” (p. 1048). Thus, in return for military protection, the Kedah ruler was more than willing to offer the EEIC the island of Penang, and entrusted English country trader Francis Light (1740–1794) as his *wakil* (representative) in negotiations with Calcutta. Light used Sultan Abdullah’s misplaced trust to advance his personal ambitions, and ultimately Kedah lost Penang to the EEIC without the company committing the requested military protection in return.

The optimistic enthusiasm for developing Penang into a successful, flourishing trading port, however, was short-lived. Trade grew steadily, but not spectacularly (Hussin, [2007](#)). Plans for Penang as a naval base was shelved after 1810; the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) had ended the French threat in the Bay of Bengal and the Straits. Even ideas of using Penang as a center for ship repairs and shipbuilding were dashed owing to the paucity of suitable wood, labor shortages, and infrastructure limitations. Meanwhile, Light’s attempt to transform Penang into a ‘second Maluku’ was unsuccessful. Spice plantations on the island suffered from inexperience and disease, and ultimately their death knell was sounded by decreased demand (and prices) on the global market.

Penang’s woes were, in fact, legion. Its geographical position enabled it to take a sizeable share of the economic pie in the northern corridor of the Straits, but it was too distant to challenge Dutch control over the central and southern parts of the Straits. Additionally, its northern position denied Penang the possibility of monitoring Dutch Melaka, let alone Batavia. The Napoleonic Wars, which saw the flight of the Dutch royal House of Orange to London and the British gaining temporary control over Dutch possessions in the East, further impacted Penang adversely. Between 1810 and 1816, the British occupied Melaka; Padang, in southern Sumatra; Batavia, in Java; and Maluku.¹³ Traders, who had chosen the free port of Penang over the prohibitive dues of Dutch ports, returned to these ports once free trade was implemented. Penang’s fate was sealed by the post-Napoleonic geopolitical situation in Europe and the acquisition of Singapore in 1819. Ultimately, the island was destined not to be the major entrepôt of the Straits.

13 Britain also occupied the Cape Province (in present-day South Africa) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka).



The final years of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth century ushered in radical developments and new beginnings that had antecedents in the preceding century. The Industrial Revolution increased Dutch and the English involvement in local native affairs, up to and including territorial acquisition if deemed expedient. It became increasingly apparent that paradigms were shifting, with emphasis moving from mercantilist interests to industrial and production-orientated ones.

5 'Just Between Us': The Partitioning of the Malay Archipelago

The years between 1815 and 1824 saw Britain attempting to not only lend its support to the newly established Kingdom of the Netherlands, under King William I (1772–1843),¹⁴ but also to economically revitalize this Dutch state. London sought to avert a repeat of its experiences with the French, who had taken over the Low Countries and threatened Britain with nothing but a narrow channel between them. In restoring the VOC's former possessions in the East Indies,¹⁵ viz. Melaka, Padang, Java, and Maluku, the Convention of London (1814) sought primarily to boost and sustain the kingdom's economic viability (and thus its political strength in Europe). However, as a result, the East Indiamen plying the China trade *again* had to rely on Dutch ports and goodwill. Understandably, uneasiness and ambivalence prevailed.¹⁶

14 The Kingdom of the Netherlands, established in 1814, incorporated the former Dutch Republic and the Belgian provinces of the Hapsburg.

15 Owing to a combination of insurmountable problems (mismanagement, corruption), the VOC became bankrupt and was formally dissolved in 1799. All of its debts were transferred to the Batavian Republic. The former VOC possessions in the East Indies, collectively referred to as the Dutch East Indies, gradually expanded over the course of the nineteenth century. These territories later became the Republic of Indonesia.

16 For a detailed analysis of this "uneasiness and ambivalence", see Tarling (1962).

Against this background, and drawing on his experience administering Java during the brief British occupation, Stamford Raffles (1781–1826) viewed the extension of British hegemony, liberal principles, and free trade practices over the entire Malay Archipelago as a panacea to Dutch monopolistic and draconian rule.¹⁷ His visionary ambition urged him to identify a suitable strategic base for checking Dutch activities, and in turn for expanding British control, “a general right of superintendence over, and interference with, all the Malay states” (Tarling, [1993](#), p. 26). Although the EEIC—supporting Whitehall’s goal of reinvigorating the Dutch in the East Indies—rejected Raffles’ attempt to transform Bencoolen into a base of operations, Governor-General the Earl of Moira (1813–23) at Calcutta (present-day Kolkata), the headquarters of the EEIC, approved Raffles’ proposal to establish treaty relations with Aceh, and *the possibility of establishing a trading station at the southern entrance to the Straits*.

In pursuing the latter proposal, Raffles, a keen student of the Malay World, language, literature, history, and environs, struck on the island of Singapore, the old trading polity of Temasek. Under T’ai governance, Temasek had offered a promising alternative to Riau, as ships could sail directly northwards, through the Straits of Singapore and into the Straits of Melaka, thereby avoiding the circuitous Riau–Lingga Archipelago and its piratical activities.

At the time, Singapore was under the authority of the *Temenggong* of the Johor–Riau Empire. Following the passing of Sultan Mahmud in 1812, this empire had been thrust into a succession dispute between two claimants born of commoner mothers, Abdul Rahman and his stepbrother Hussain (Trocki, [1979/2007](#)). Abdul Rahman had the support of the Bugis faction, and was recognized by the Dutch as the legitimate heir to the throne in an 1818 treaty.¹⁸ In line with his intent of limiting Dutch influence, in 1819 Raffles received the blessings of the Temenggong to establish a factory in Singapore. In order to acquire royal sanction, he had signed another formal agreement with Hussain, whom the British legitimized as the rightful ruler of the Johor–Riau Empire. Unsurprisingly, Raffles’ highhanded action and establishment of Singapore encountered vehement protest from Batavia, Amsterdam, and The Hague. However, the Dutch refrained from taking direct action.

17 Raffles was appointed as lieutenant-general of Java in 1811, whereby he introduced liberal reforms. He was, however, recalled in 1815 after he implemented waged labor in lieu of forced labor. As these reforms resulted in financial losses and the sale of government land to prop up an unstable paper currency, he was thus suspected of wrongdoing and financial impropriety. Shortly thereafter, however, he was vindicated with the lieutenant-generalship of Bengkulu in 1817. See Turnbull ([2004](#)).

18 The Dutch respite at Riau was between 1784 and 1795, after which they were driven out.



On the eve of the Treaty of London (1824), affairs—and in turn the fate of the Straits of Malacca and the entire Malay Archipelago—were exclusively in the hands of bureaucrats in Whitehall and, to a lesser extent, The Hague. Indigenous powers and polities in the region had been largely weakened, surviving only in an emaciated state. Country traders' dominance had eroded native and Chinese commercial ascendancy, such that Westerners, mainly the British, had a strong grip on regional and international trade in and around the Straits by the start of the nineteenth century.

To secure their hegemonic positions, both the British and the Dutch increased efforts to eradicate piracy in the Straits and across insular Southeast Asia. "Checking piracy was not a European innovation," it was asserted, as "[Ming] China had helped to establish Melaka in the fifteenth century in order to check [native piracy]." However, "from the early nineteenth century the Europeans gave it a new emphasis" (Tarling, [2004](#), p. 1090).

Western notions of piracy were borne from experiences and perceptions drawn from the West Indies, the Caribbean lairs and 'playgrounds' of English, Dutch and French privateers and buccaneers who raided European galleons and other ships for treasure, particularly between the 1700s and 1730s (see Rediker, [1989](#)). Although there is no denying the existence of a Caribbean-style Jack Tar activities in the Malay Archipelago, many of these so-called 'piratical activities' could have been European misinterpretations of traditional commercial exchanges. "What was regarded by traditional traders and *orang laut* as the legitimate levying of taxes, 'gifts' and exchanges, sometime legitimated by force, sometimes by custom was, to the European, piracy" (Chuan & Cleary, [2000](#), p. 104). Other activities were undertaken by the *raja dilaut*, the 'kings of the seas', royal pretenders who used the seas to acquire untold wealth through plunder and pillage rather than living out impotent and emaciated lives in court (Ahmad, [1982](#)).

Although it is true that “Europeans drew a distinction between ‘piracy,’ mere robbery at sea on the part of the common enemy of humankind, and acts of violence and plunder authorized by a recognized state through licensed privateering or declaration of war”—condemning the former and condoning the latter (Tarling, [2004](#))—their underlying crusade against piracy throughout the Straits and the Malay Archipelago nonetheless had broader political motives. “The suppression of piracy was associated with attempts to reorder the Malay World – though not necessarily, indeed, to bring it under formal European [British and Dutch] control” (Tarling, [2004](#)). It was therefore not surprising that one of the clauses of the Treaty of London (1824) emphasized the suppression of piracy by both signatories in their newly designated spheres of influence.

Piracy aside, following the conclusion of the Convention of London (1814), there were anxieties within British official circles that the return of the Dutch to their possessions in the East Indies would mean accepting the pre-war situation of monopolistic practices that excluded non-Dutch commercial participation. However, as far as Whitehall was concerned, of greater importance was Dutch control of the greater part of the Straits, a strategic consideration that resulted in Whitehall’s continued support for the retention of Singapore as an obstacle to Dutch hegemonic designs. What London intended and expected was spelled out by Foreign Secretary Lord Castlereagh, who expressed in 1819:

A good understanding is to both states [Britain and the Netherlands] more important to their general interests than any question of local [East Indies] policy...the Basis [of an Anglo-Dutch settlement] of which, on the part of the British Government, will be to endeavour to provide adequately for the commercial Rights and Interests of British Subjects [merchants], without being incidentally drawn into a practical struggle for Military and Political dominion in the eastern seas, with the Government of the Netherlands. (Tarling, [1993](#), p. 27)



The Treaty of London, also known as the Anglo–Dutch Treaty of 1824, addressed the aforementioned anxieties and concerns, decisively assigning each signatory a position and role in the Straits and the East Indies.

The essence of it [namely the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824] was that the British should not offer a political challenge to the Dutch in the [Malay] archipelago, whereas the Dutch would offer British traders fair opportunity in ports they possessed or in respect of which they had contracts with Indonesian rulers. (Tarling, [2004](#), p. 161)

Moreover, there was a territorial clause: the British gave up Bengkulu and the Dutch transferred Melaka and acknowledged the British occupation of Singapore. The Straits of Malacca became a territorial divide between the signatories' respective spheres, whereby the British pledged not to establish settlements on Sumatra and the Dutch likewise on the peninsula. Both parties agreed to suppress piracy in their respective areas of influence.

The treaty made it apparent that the Malay Archipelago was an exclusively British and Dutch domain; other Western powers were unwelcome, as the 'exclusive Lords of the East' demonstrated amply in theory and in practice. It was, however, clear and fully acknowledged that the British 'Lord' was greater than his Dutch counterpart. The treaty achieved what London had intended, namely:

An effectively independent and friendly Dutch state was important to the British in Europe, both as part of the balance of power, and part of the defensive outwork of Britain itself: a Dutch empire overseas was the price to be paid. (Tarling, [1993](#), p. 27)

Moreover,

Britain's main concern was with the Straits of Melaka, a thoroughfare for British shipping [in the China tea trade]. While one side guarded by the Straits Settlements [established in 1826], and the other side by the Dutch, it was not at risk from [other] major [Western] powers. (Tarling, [2002](#), p. 48)

Consequently, the Straits of Malacca was assigned a new role in a new play on a new stage, becoming a divider, a boundary, far divorced from its past persona as a unifying force. The Straits, physically and symbolically, divided the British and Dutch spheres. The former, comprising the Malay Peninsula and Singapore, subsequently evolved into the political entity referred to as 'British Malaya', and the latter, comprising Sumatra and the entire Malay Archipelago, became the 'Dutch East Indies'. Both realms developed independently of one another, in different directions and tempos, under their respective 'Lords'.

6 Marching to Different Colonial Drumbeats

Two years after the Treaty of London, the British decided to bring together their three possessions on the eastern shores of the Straits into a unified administrative structure, one mainly intended to serve and secure the EEIC's lucrative China trade route through the Straits: the Straits Settlements. Penang, the most senior component, was the initial capital (until 1832) with administrative responsibility over Singapore and Melaka.¹⁹

From its inception in 1826 to 1867, the Straits Settlements was an extension of the British Indian establishment at Calcutta and governed as the Fourth Presidency of India.²⁰ The Straits Settlements provided a platform for immigrant labor (largely Chinese and Indian) and capital (mainly British) to flow into the western Malay States of the peninsula, beginning in the 1840s and accelerating in the mid-1870s, after the Pangkor Engagement (1874) facilitated direct British intervention (Khoo, [1972](#); Sadka, [1968](#); Chai, [1967](#)).

The lesser 'Lord', meanwhile, consolidated its hold on Java at the expense of native rulers through a series of political maneuverings and strategic partnerships dedicated to eliminating anti-Dutch elements (Ricklefs, [2008](#)). Economically the Dutch intensified their earlier practice in Maluku of overseeing the production, collection, shipment, and marketing of major commodities. From the 1830s, Java witnessed and experienced the full impact of the Dutch *cultuurstelsel* (cultivation system), whereby specific crops such as coffee, indigo, and sugarcane were cultivated by native farmers, delivered to the Dutch, and shipped to Amsterdam for the European market (Thee, [2013](#)).

¹⁹ To these initial three territories, others were later added: Cocos Keeling Islands (1866), Dindings (1874), Christmas Island (1900), and Labuan (1906).

²⁰ In 1805, Penang was designated this status and granted a full complement of a governor, a council, and administrative staff. However, perennial financial problems resulted in this status being removed in 1830 and Penang being re-designated a Residency (headed by a Resident, and with reduced administrative personnel). See Turnbull ([1972](#)).



While the British in the peninsular Malay States adopted a liberal policy towards economic exploitation in the extractive and agricultural sectors, allowing private enterprises (mainly British and Chinese) a free rein, with the necessary infrastructure (transport, ports, utilities, and telecommunications) furnished by the colonial administration, the Dutch adopted a state-controlled, centralized system. The two realms thus followed different colonial drumbeats, further accentuating their differences.

Indeed, the division of territory mandated by the Treaty of London (1824) effectively separated two realms that had, for centuries, shared a common socio-cultural, socio-economic, and political heritage. This division persisted throughout the course of colonial domination, and to a large extent endures in the current post-colonial period.

7 Concluding Remarks

In retrospect, the phrase ‘political divide’ concisely depicts the Straits of Malacca’s role as a political boundary between the Western colonial powers. Prior to the year 1824, economic factors (trade and commerce) were predominant, with local, regional, and international trade networks and linkages crisscrossing the Straits, rendering this body of water as a unifying, all-embracing force. This economic activity initially had a conspicuous nodal center, i.e. Srivijaya and later Melaka. From the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, fragmentation became increasingly evident, and by the early nineteenth century it was clear that there were only two contenders for total control: the British and the Dutch. After the Treaty of London (1824), these ‘exclusive Lords of the East’ used the Straits of Malacca as a colonial divide, one separating their respective political realms. The nation-states of Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and Indonesia were subsequently borne from this colonial partition.

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