

## 'Bridge' to 'Fence': A Maritime History of the Straits of Malacca

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### Abstract

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Oceans, seas, straits and other bodies of water may pose as dividers between lands, but at the same time, function as bridges interconnecting diverse territories. The latter ascribed a positive attribute in characterizing oceans, seas, straits as linkages between islands, and islands with continents. This study emphasizes the history of the Straits of Malacca and its role to the dynamic of world interconnecting networks. The Straits of Malacca (hereinafter the Straits) in the midst of Southeast Asia is a medium of interaction that enjoins the Malay Peninsula (present day West/Peninsular Malaysia) to other parts of the region spanning across to distant Java and Borneo. The Straits, from time immemorial, has functioned as a natural 'bridge' of the Malay World, referring to the Malay Archipelago or Nusantara, that largely comprised the greater expanse of insular Southeast Asia. This 'bridge' was even more significant in the period prior to the nineteenth century, being apparent as early as the mid-seventh century CE.

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### Introduction

Applying the methodology of historical analysis and evaluation, this paper draws out the unifying attributes of the Straits as the significant and conspicuous feature of its maritime history dating back to the early kingdoms of Southeast Asia until the early decades of the nineteenth century. It shall be argued here that the Malay World had once been perceived as a singular entity of its own surrounded by waters, the Straits in particular, that served as 'bridges' interconnecting and uniting the various lands and peoples of the Malay realm. But this bridging role ceased to be effective with the proverbial stroke of a pen (Treaty of London, 1824) in faraway London when Britain and the Netherlands bilaterally decided on the partition of insular Southeast Asia between themselves whereby an imaginary plumb line that ran the entire length of the Straits figuratively acting as a 'fence' or 'divider' dictating that all territories and seas to its northwards came under the sphere of influence of the former, and its southwards, of the latter.

As a major artery of trade and communication on the maritime 'Silk Road', the Straits linked East Asia, South Asia thence to West Asia and Europe. At the same time, the Straits served as a 'bridge' within Nusantara, particularly conspicuous during the zenith of the thalassocratic empires of Srivijaya (seventh to thirteenth century CE) and Melaka (fifteenth century CE) where hegemonic dominance of the region was unequalled and unchallenged. Thereafter, for the next two centuries (sixteenth-seventeenth centuries CE), witnessed a three-way bitter struggle for control over the Straits played out between Aceh (north), Portuguese Melaka (central), and Johor (south). The political and military struggle notwithstanding, the Straits continued to play its role as an economic and socio-cultural 'bridge'. Then, from the eighteenth century, the Dutch and the English entered the stage with intense rivalry between them for predominance of the East Indies. Subsequently, a settlement reached in 1824 with a treaty signed in London, the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, or formally, the Treaty of London

(1824). Dictates of the latter, literally and dramatically overnight, transformed the Straits, from a 'bridge' of unity to a 'fence' of division.

### **The Straits as Part of the Maritime 'Silk Road'**

Although undeniably there was a trickling of some long-distance overland trade prior to the first century BCE, the establishment of the 'Silk Road' that commercially linked Han dynasty China (206 BCE-220 CE) in the East to the Roman empire (27 BCE-476 CE) in the West, in between enjoining Central and West Asia and the Mediterranean and Europe, revolutionized trade and human interaction over vast stretches of territories. The trade in luxuries (hence Silk Road, from China's unsurpassed famed fabric of silk) (Bentley, 1993) spurred the setting up of a network of trade routes traversing the Eurasian landmass and bridging the civilizations of the Orient with the Occident. Within the borders, Chinese and Roman garrisons ensured protection and safe passage for trade caravans meandering across the vast lands. Beyond the borders, traders were confronted with a harsh 'no man's land', that even at the best of peaceful times, was unquestionably precarious: from the dangerous and unforgiving terrain, uncompromising weather conditions to the ubiquitous presence of marauders, avaricious local strongmen whose territory that caravans transverse and depend on supplies (water and food). Only the wise, the cunning, and the diplomat survived.

A noticeable gradual decline in the usage of this overland route became apparent from the second century CE as a result of two developments. Firstly, instability of the Kushan Empire as a consequence of tribal incursions from without, and secondly, the demise of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 CE). The Kushan Empire, centred in Bactria (later shifted to Kabul), an important trading station on the Silk Road, stretched from Central Asia to northern India; in present day terms covering Afghanistan, Pakistan, and vast expanse of north-western India. The fall of the Han ushered the rise of non-Chinese dynasties in North China, and the era of the Three Kingdoms (220-280 CE) in the central plains. The latter comprised three rival powers: Cao Wei (Luoyang), Eastern Wu (Nanjing, Yangtze and south), and Shu (Sichuan), incessantly struggling for supremacy and hegemony.

The Eastern Wu dynasty (221-280 CE) in the south was barred from the Silk Road that was orchestrated by rivals, Cao Wei and Shu. In order to meet the demand of luxuries from the West, the resourceful rulers of Eastern Wu explored alternative routes, to either seek an overland route to Burma (modern Myanmar), or utilize the port-city of Guangzhou (Canton). In opting for the latter, it boosted the maritime trading traffic between Guangzhou and Oc-Eo on the lower Mekong River delta (coinciding with present day An Giang province, Vietnam). Oc-Eo was believed to be the cosmopolitan port of the kingdom of Funan (first to seventh century CE). Chinese trade goods from Guangzhou brought to Oc-Eo were exchanged for products from the 'West', implying the diverse products of South Asia, eastern Africa, and eastern Mediterranean.

The port-city of Oc-Eo was the eastern terminus of the peninsular portage overland route traversing the Isthmus of Kra. Trade goods at ports on the eastern coasts of the Gulf of Siam were carried overland to the Isthmus' western shores, loaded onto ships and sailed across the Andaman Sea, the Bay of Bengal thence to India and Sri Lanka (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 2002, pp. 30-50).

From Arikamedu, Kaverippumpattinam, and Madurai on the Coromendal Coast, coastal shipping brought the goods to the ports on the western Malabar Coast, viz. Nelkunda, Muziris, Kalligeris, Suppara, and Barygaza and Barbaricum (Hall 1985, 30). Thence, the goods were carried on vessels that either headed towards the Persian Gulf (Babylon, Seleucia), or the Red Sea (Leuke Kome, Berenice, Coptos, Myos Hormos, Alexandria) onward to the Mediterranean, and to Rome. Meanwhile, trade goods from insular Southeast Asia were already making their way to Oc-Eo during this early period (c. first century CE), carried on Malay crafts piloted by skilful *nakhoda* (sea captain) criss-crossing the archipelago.

Like the Silk Road, this trans-peninsular portage overland trade route at the best of times posed a formidable challenge, from thick equatorial rainforests, treacherous fast flowing rivers to hilly terrain, proved risky and problematic thereby incurring high cost for luxury trade goods. Consequent of seemingly insurmountable environmental obstacles, the usage of this overland isthmian passage

was increasingly avoided. Instead, preference shifted to a comparatively lower risk option, namely the maritime route utilizing the Straits to sail into the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. Inevitably, this trans-peninsular overland trade route fell into disuse by the fifth century CE (Miksic 1999, 74-75).

### Pivot of the Maritime ‘Silk Road’, From Circa Fifth Century CE

The exchange of trade goods within Southeast Asia was undertaken overland and across the seas. For the latter, the attainment of some sophistication in shipbuilding skills and adaptive sailing techniques in order to master treacherous rivers and the open oceans facilitated trading ventures. The pre-steam age relied on sails, and the ability to master the seasonal monsoonal winds, proved essential. Between November and February, the season of the northeast monsoon brings rain to the region. Then, from about June, and extending to August, the prevailing southwest monsoon oversee a relatively dry season with scanty showers. The pattern of the monsoons then greatly impacted both the agricultural cycle and passage of sailing ships in the region.

The master of the sea and the wind, the quintessential *nakhoda* were the *Orang Laut* (Malay lit., ‘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’, hence responsible for the carrying trade across the region and beyond (Sather 1999; Sopher 1965).

By 200 BCE, it is known that peoples of Southeast Asian had utilized bronze, brass, tin, and iron for tools, weaponry, utensils, and ornaments for ritual, the most celebrated were the large bronze ceremonial Dong-son drums. But of more significance, ‘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* prior to any significant trade with imperial India or China’ (Hall 1992, 23).

At the same time, archaeological evidence generally acknowledged that by the first millennium BCE and the early part of the first millennium CE in the vicinity of the Malay Peninsula (contemporary West Malaysia), there were functional trading sites on the coast as well as on the lower reaches of rivers (Heng, 1990, 23). Three functional categories of sites were differentiated: ‘collecting centres’, ‘feeder points’, and ‘entrepôts’ (Heng, 1990, 22, 26, 29). Resulting from the maritime trade between the South China Sea to the east, and the Bay of Bengal/Indian Ocean to the west, trading sites on the Malay Peninsula facilitated this commercial traffic, serving as collecting centres that sourced products from its hinterlands for the long-distance East-West trade; entrepôts were the rendezvous point where gathered merchants of long-distance trade who landed their goods, repackaged, and reshipped to other lands; and, feeder points that fed the entrepôts and collecting centres with specific products brought from its immediate hinterland.

In such trading activities, the Straits acted as a ‘bridge’ for traders from East Asia to interact with counterparts from South and West Asia as well as from Southeast Asia. During this early period, the Straits was already functioning as a conduit of East-West trade. This unifying attribute of the Straits that brought together merchants from afar with those from within the region was evident. Commercial interaction was only made possible by the rhythm of the winds, ‘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 2004,908).

Meanwhile, the trading sites gradually developed structures of governance to oversee commercial intercourse, in managing the influx of immigrants that spurred population growth and density, and the task of sustaining a peaceful and stable environment on land and at sea facilitating trading activities. In this manner, the various trading sites transformed themselves into littoral or riparian trading states (Bronson 1977/8). Irrespective of size, early trading states shared common characteristics.

All were essentially as riparian as they were coastal ... were focussed upon and geographically structured by rivers [that] ... provided the major channels of trade and communication; settlement associated with the state was generally located within a kilometre or so of these waterways. ... [and] settlement size tended to decrease with distance from the coast and from the major branch of the river. The resulting pattern of economic and political linkages binding together the members of the state, the *ra'ayat* [common people] ... was thus both dendritic and hierarchical, conforming closely to the shape of the river and its tributaries. The capital was usually located at the point where the river system drained into the sea, or at the closest dry and defensible site upriver. Secondary and tertiary centres, which acted as stapling and trading posts for the port-capital, were normally located at the confluence of major and minor tributaries of the river (Christie 1990, 4-5).

### **Thalassocrasies Over the Straits: From Srivijaya to Melaka**

The Malay trading empires of Srivijaya and Melaka, that dominated the greater part of insular Southeast Asia and its international maritime trade during their ascendancy, seventh to the fifteenth century CE, demonstrated the unifying attributes of and the roles played by the Straits. More specifically, Srivijaya and Melaka unified the entire realm of the Straits and beyond under their political and economic patronage.

At its apex, Srivijaya, centered on the lower reaches of the Musi River in the vicinity of what is modern Palembang, was the preeminent power over the Straits, the Malay Peninsula, the Sunda Strait, central and southern Sumatra, the Isthmus of Kra, present-day southern Thailand, the Menam delta northwards to Lavo, the Mekong delta stretching inland towards Indrapura, western and central Java, and to a lesser extent, across the Java Sea to the southwest coastal parts of Borneo. Malay Buddhist Srivijaya (Sanskrit for 'Auspicious Victory') assumed dominance over its neighbouring rival, the Hindu Malay kingdom of Malayu on the adjacent Batang Hari River basin in 682 CE, thereby forming its hegemony over the greater part of southern Sumatra. Srivijaya's political and economic power owed, not only to its formidable naval might, but also, even more importantly, on cultivating mutual alliances and loyalty purchases. Evidence of the latter can be seen from a seventh century CE royal inscriptions in Old Malay (*Melayu kuno*) uncovered in the Palembang vicinity that revealed the mechanism exploited by Sumatran rulers to enforce their will and power. The inscriptions 'contain elaborate royal curses that outline the terrible consequences of disobedience to the ruler, and the blessings that might flow to loyal subjects [and] the wording of these royal oaths makes it clear that the ruler's subjects were enjoined to believe in his sacred authority and his power to exact terrible punishments from a distance' (Drakard 2004, 1273) The rulers of Srivijaya capitalized on royal curses and the threat of royal retribution from afar in securing the support, cooperation, and loyalty of the Orang Laut (Rahman 1990, 65-66).

During its ascendancy, Srivijaya was the foremost entrepôt in Southeast Asia. But at the same time, it afforded opportunities for others, albeit reduced to sub-regional entrepôts, to exist enabling them to partake of the regional and international seaborne commerce. 'The local entrepôts', it seemed were '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' (Shuhaimini 1990, 69; Rahman 1990 70, 71, 73, 74) Moreover,

Following the integration of a territory and submission of a ruler [to Srivijaya's hegemony], his mandala [a concentric pattern in Hindu-Buddhist symbolism] was not administratively annexed to Srivijaya (the distances between the city states made this integration physically impossible). [Instead] The ruler kept his position as the legitimate head of an economically autonomous polity, but exchange of princes (datus) and inter-marriages created strong familial and religious ties between vassal and the centre of power in Palembang. ... [In fact] vassals were even encouraged, through help from the Maharajas [of Srivijaya] and other vassals, to increase their mandalas by

submitting neighbouring cities who did not recognise their affiliation to Srivijaya (Munoz 2006, 121).

Therefore, it was the reliance on this peculiar structure of vassal-client relations whereby, ‘an intricate web of kinship, political and familial ties and [most importantly and] ultimately by the understanding that everybody was sharing a common interest – *trade above all*, that succinctly described Srivijaya’s iron-grip of power of its vast seaborne empire (Munoz 2006, 119).

The long-distance China trade in luxuries was the pillar of Srivijaya’s commercial prowess, justifying and necessitating a vast maritime realm. Much sought in the Chinese market were three jungle products from Southeast Asia’s rainforest, notably camphor, benzoin, and *ju*, a resin, all indispensable ingredients in medicines (Wolters 1967, 95-110; Gungwu 1958, 113). It was prudent then that Srivijaya cast its hegemonic net over the centres whence these forest products were collected. Meanwhile, Srivijaya’s commercial vessels as well as naval forces ensured that local and regional trade within archipelagic Southeast Asia where these products flowed, be secured and sustained, and that all stakeholders, from vassal states that controlled the collecting centres, feeder points, and entrepôts to shippers and their crews, traders and commercial agents, mutually benefitted from the largesse and profits of trade.

Srivijaya’s benefits from the long-distance East Asia (China) trade, and to a lesser extent, with South and West Asia, transformed the Straits to be the foremost sea passage of the international maritime Silk Road during the ninth and tenth centuries CE, due to geopolitical conditions beyond the region then. Caravans traversing the overland Silk Road to the Mediterranean and Europe had become increasingly precarious (translated into high prices of trade goods) consequent of instability in West and Central Asia, viz. the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate that spurred the ascendancy of the Abbasids in 750 CE, and Tibetan resurgence against a weakening of T’ang China’s western frontiers (Bennison 2009, 24-27; Beckwith 1987, 108-142). The consolidation of Abbasid power that invariably forced the shifting of its power base, finally at Baghdad in 762 CE, a root cause of unsettling conditions across West Asia adversely impacting present day Iran and Iraq, territories where the Silk Road crosses (Lapidus 2002, 54). Similarly, in Central Asia, where the Silk Road skirted the Taklamakan Desert utilizing its northern and southern peripheries, was severely impacted by Tibetan forces sacking T’ang forces; eventually Tibetan forces seized strategic Dunhuang in 787 CE. Dunhuang, one of four frontier garrison towns (including Jiuquan, Zhangye and Wuwei), shattered Tang’s prestige and power in the region. Dunhuang, was particularly strategic, for it commanded the entry into the Northern and Southern Silk Roads (Hill 2009, 133; Beckwith 2009, 157). Tibetan control over these strategic areas, however, faced challenges from the Uighurs, led to further instability.

Under the apogee of Srivijaya, the Straits posed as a unifying ‘sea’, not dissimilar to Europe’s Mediterranean. Besides the all-important lucrative long-distance trade of the maritime Silk Road, there remained the essential networks of local and regional trade that linked the chains between various collecting centres, feeder points, and entrepôts of the region. While geographical location positioned Srivijaya in overseeing the East-West seaborne trade through the Straits, it was this Malay Buddhist thalassocracy’s ability to weave and sustain the support, cooperation, and loyalty of vassal and subordinate polities all mutually bound by the profits gained from commerce.

As the centre for Mahayana Buddhist learning, Srivijaya drew in the pilgrim traffic from East Asia and South Asia, the most famous was the Chinese Buddhist monk, Yijing (635-713 CE), formerly romanized as I-ching or I-tsing, who first sojourned in 671 CE. This pilgrim traffic, between China and India, further enhanced the significance of the Straits in bringing together religious adherents to Srivijaya for study, and/or a half-way stopover, to their onward journey eastwards or westwards (Hall 1985, 37).

Between the declining fortunes of Srivijaya and the rise of Melaka, a period (fourteenth century CE) where hegemony over the Straits was contested by contenders from the Java inland-based Majapahit, coastal Sumatran (Lamuri, Samudra-Pasai, Deli, Panai, Malayu-Jambi) and peninsular (Trang, Kedah, Perak, Temasek) polities. Temasek (present day Singapore) was then under T’ai subjugation. Ram Khamhaeng (ca. 1237/1247-1298) of Sukhothai, having secured Nakhon Si

Thammarat in 1293 CE and extended control over the peninsular Malay polities to Temasek, was ambitiously considering dominance over the Straits. Equally ambitious was Javanese Majapahit that was ever eager in seizing control of the commercial traffic through the Straits. In the meantime, having unshackled their Srivijayan vassalage yolk and successfully traded directly with China (bypassing their former patron), the east coast Sumatran trading polities, not only intend to maintain their independence, but also to secure a stake in the Straits vis-à-vis other stakeholders. Throughout the entire fourteenth century CE, 'the Straits of Malacca area, long the stronghold of the Sri Vijaya[n] [E]mpire, was contested between the Javanese, Chinese, Tai and local Sumatran forces' (Reid 1993, 203).

Then, at the beginning of the fifteenth century on the central western coast of the Malay Peninsula emerged a 'second Srivijaya'. The establishment of Melaka, a Malay polity that lent its name to the Straits that it dominated for the greater part of the fifteenth century, developed and maintained its hegemony after the Srivijayan model. Like its predecessor, Melaka's naval force was essential in enforcing its will. But military coercion alone, was not fundamental in its success as a great entrepôt in the region then. The basis of its celebrated success was in establishing and nurturing strong and sustainable vassal-client relations with the various collecting centres, feeder points, and secondary 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 city [Malacca]' (Cleary 2000, 89-90).

Malay Muslim Melaka's initial success is succinctly explained.

Melaka quickly became a new version of the Śrīvijayan model of a Malay-led international entrepôt. Its relationship with China provided protection from Ayutthayan claims, and Majapahit, in the fifteenth century, was already in decline. Melaka established a supremacy over other centres of Malay authority along the coasts of the peninsula and the north[-]eastern coast of Sumatra, thereby guaranteeing control of all trade passing through the [S]traits [of Malacca]. Firm relationships were developed with Gujerati and Tamil merchants having access to Western markets and with the north Javanese ports that enjoyed access to Maluku (the Moluccas), the [S]pice [I]slands to the east (Taylor 1992, 175-176).

How Melaka *sustained* as 'the central entrepôt for trade in and through Southeast Asia' throughout the fifteenth century was a tandem combination of natural attributes and man-made designs. The port-city's location, at one of the narrowest part of the Straits, less than 50 kilometres between Melaka and Rupa Island (present day Indonesia), enabled direct control of the seaborne traffic. Situated in the zone of the equatorial calms, Melaka offered a safe haven for ships awaiting the changing monsoonal winds. During this sojourning period, merchants from the East interacted with counterparts from the West, and also with those from within the Southeast Asia region itself. Consequently, Melaka became the quintessential market place, an international emporium indeed. The natural and sheltered harbour, the appropriate depth agreeable to sailing vessels of the day, contributed to the port-city's natural advantages. Melaka's rich and differentiated hinterlands, from both mainland and archipelagic Southeast Asia, supplied highly demanded trade goods (spices, forest products, sea produce) to East Asian and Mediterranean/European markets, the latter through Indian and Arab intermediaries.

In tandem with the natural attributes, were the practical and visionary policies of the Malay Muslim Melaka rulers. From its initial opening, Melaka's rulers adopted a market economy with all its concomitant benefits.

The merchants conducted their business on their own account, not on the behalf of their sovereigns. One could become a merchant by free choice, not by royal appointment. Chiefly, prices formed freely, by the sole laws of supply and demand, rather than by convention amongst the rulers. In brief, the Sultanate was an islet of

monetary economy in expansion, rather than a belated survival of the archaic port-of-trade, which operated as a privileged palce [sic.] of exchanges between states. *The State existed there because of trade, not trade because of the State* (Thomaz n.d., 5).

Having foreign merchant communities settled within the confines of the port-city was greatly encouraged by the prudent Malay rulers. The greater the number of resident merchants, the higher the volume of trade transacted, hence enriching the state coffers through the custom house. Equally, if not more importantly, was the issue of collating intelligence. The knowledge and skills of foreign merchants to market conditions that was greatly dependent on the political climate in their respective countries, and the promotion of trust, confidence, and reliance between local authorities and foreign merchants were essential to long-distance trade that entailed high risks, deferred payments, and secured storage of large consignment of goods. Thus, ample storage facilities (*godowns*) were provided.

Early rulers' of Melaka who readily embraced Islam executed a strategic and calculated move, not only to attract co-adherents to the port-city, but also to garner the trust and confidence of Muslim merchants of South and West Asia then dominating both trade and trade routes. The maritime trade of the Arab Sea and the Indian Ocean thence the Bay of Bengal, were in the hands of Arab Muslims and Gujerati Muslims (Pearson 2003, 62-112). Though intangible and unquantifiable, religious solidarity nurtured a strong bond between Malay Muslim Melaka rulers and the foreign mercantile community dominated by Muslims. Melaka subsequently developed into a regional centre for Islamic studies whence gathered Muslim scholars of every shade and schools from different parts of the Muslim world. Melaka was reputed to be responsible for the Islamization of the northern Javanese polities that supplied the port-city the bulk of its rice requirements (Andaya & Ishii 1992, 516-519). Malay Muslim Melaka, to a large extent, exemplified Malay Buddhist Srivijaya in economic supremacy and religious primacy, the latter saw Sunni Islam replacing Mahayana Buddhism.

Melaka's rulers readily adopted the *syahbandar* system, a harbour management practice evident in most Indian Ocean ports and on the east African coasts. The four major mercantile communities, of Gujaratis, Tamils, Javanese and Chinese, were each respectively under the charge of a local Malay syahbandar, who liaised with a chief representative of the foreigners. The Malay syahbandar facilitated procedures with the foreign representatives on relations with the sultanate, taxes, transportation and storage of goods, and the allocation and leasing of godowns.

Through a prudent combination of vassal-client relations, Islamic conversions and religious solidarity, conquests, and political marriages, Malay Muslim Melaka managed to sustain a tight grip over the Straits that, in turn, regulated and dominated the international 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 & Wheatly 1983, 509). Similar to the mandala of Srivijaya, Melaka too exerted its hegemony radiating from its core (its port-city) outwards to its peripheries; Kelantan at its northernmost extent on the peninsula, and Rokan on Sumatra, and Tungkal and Lingga, its southernmost point (Sandhu & Wheatly 1983, 507 & 508). Imitating Srivijaya, Melaka's sphere of influence brought together the entire Straits' region under its fold. Melaka, however, surpassed its predecessor, not only in binding the many parts of the region economically through trade, but also religiously and socio-culturally of what became to be characteristic of the Malay World.

Following the Portuguese seizure of Melaka in 1511, no port-city or polity ever emerged on either shores of the Straits that was an economic and/or religious pivot to the region. The era of a Malay-based dominating power with unchallenged control over the Straits and ably to bring together the various parts under one single umbrella of influence, notably the Malay World, had passed. Lest a political unity, nonetheless, the Malay World with its socioeconomic and socio-cultural and religious attributes remained intact. Thereafter, the Straits became a fragmented sea of competing polities, each vying for political ascendancy and hegemony.

## Attaining Hegemony over the Straits: A Three-cornered Fight

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 dominance over the Straits and its immediate surroundings as in the past. Instead, internecine and attrition struggles among contending rivals, played out for the next three centuries. Numerous pretenders to Malay Muslim Melaka rose and fell, but none came close to becoming a 'third Srivijaya'. The Straits was transformed into a stage and battleground, all set for the main contenders to act. Indeed, from the mid-seventeenth century, the Acehnese begun to challenge Portuguese Melaka for hegemony over the Straits, launching a series of naval assaults. From the south, Malay Johor-Riau renewed its ambition to re-capture Melaka, the former seat of Malay power and pride. The Straits then, was fragmented into three competing zones of influence, viz. Aceh in the north, Portuguese Melaka in the centre, and Johor-Riau in the south. A three-cornered fight, a triangular struggle for control of the Straits, ensued (Borschberg 2012). But there was no apparent winner, instead the drawn-out conflicts weakened all contenders.

Despite the seizure of Melaka in 1511, the Portuguese failed to replicate its previous successes. The Portuguese did not automatically 'inherit', and/or able to assume Melaka's vast trading network. Moreover, the newcomers were unable to secure any vassal-client relations in the region. Also obvious, this Catholic power would not be able to capitalize from shared religious, ethnic, and/or socio-cultural affinities with any native polity. Having assumed the port-city's natural physical attributes, the Portuguese were unable to attract traders and merchants, the majority of them being Muslim. Further aggravating the less than favourable situation, the Portuguese attempted to fulfil their religious mission in venturing East, notably proselytizing Catholicism in order to undermine their erstwhile Muslim enemy (SarDesai 1994, 60). In promoting Catholicism in a Muslim 'lake' (the Straits), such efforts were, at best, a fruitless endeavour, and at worse, such religious zeal led to more detractors (Andaya & Ishii 1992, 521). Consequently, Muslim traders bypassed Portuguese Melaka, instead, many patronized other Muslim port-cities in the Straits, an important example being Aceh, perched on the north western tip of Sumatra. But not all Muslim merchants and others (Chinese) stayed away from Portuguese Melaka; apparently economic pragmatism overruled religious fervour (Andaya 1992, 414).

Portuguese Melaka's sustained economic existence relied heavily on coercion, namely in forcing ships to call on the port-city, and to pay dues comprising anchorage charges and customs duties on all commodities excluding foodstuff (Villiers 2004, 870). Essentially, there was heavy reliance on its naval power to enforce its will. Naval vessels also accompanied cargo ships to Maluku to obtain the highly demanded spices. Fortuitously, on numerous occasions, Portuguese naval forces managed to lift enemy sieges, and fight off assaults. At the same time, fortress *A Formosa* withstood repeated enemy assaults.

Profits from the near monopoly of the spice carrying trade to Europe made Melaka a prized possession. In fact, for the greater part of the sixteenth century, Portuguese Melaka contributed substantially to the royal coffers of Lisbon. The revenue earned from Melaka's trading activities was estimated to have quadrupled the internal revenue of Portugal itself (Villiers 2004, 61). Spice shipments as well as profits peaked between the 1570s and the 1580s (Reid 1993, 21).

However, Portuguese Melaka's economic success proved unsustainable. By the early decades of the seventeenth century, decline had set in due to a combination of factors. The incessant need for ships and men in order to enforce Portuguese Melaka's will; ensuring ships to call at Melaka; maintaining an effective naval force; cargo ships and as escorts between Maluku, Melaka, Goa, and Europe became increasingly taxing and untenable.

The Portuguese also drove trade away from Malacca by their attempts to regulate it for their own profit. For instance, Chinese shipping was at first encouraged to continue to frequent Malacca, but, as the Portuguese extended their commerce in Asia, they decided that Chinese trade at Malacca was detrimental to their own factory at Macao. The "pass" system instigated by the Portuguese, requiring merchants to obtain permission from the Portuguese before proceeding with their voyages to the



surrounding ports, on pain of having their vessels and cargoes confiscated by patrolling Portuguese warships, was the very reverse of the policies pursued by the [Malay] founders of Malacca (Lewis 1995, 10).

Moreover, the unsavoury practice of undertaking private trading on the side-line by avaricious Portuguese officials were compromising profits for the royal exchequer. Missionary activities were undermining goodwill within the region, consequently fuelling anti-Portuguese feelings throughout the surrounding territories. Increasing number of merchants in general, and Muslims in particular, turned away from Portuguese Melaka, to seek friendly and less exacting port-of-calls in the Straits with peninsular alternatives such as Kedah, Perak, and Johor, and possibilities beyond including Aceh, Aru, Siak, Indragiri on the Sumatran shores, and Brunei, on northeast Borneo.

Aceh, perched on the northern tip of Sumatra with command of the northern entry into the Straits from the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal, was by the sixteenth century CE, an emerging Islamic kingdom. Melaka's fall to the Portuguese benefitted Aceh when Muslim merchants sought alternative ports-of-call and passage to bypass this Catholic newcomer. To Aceh's advantage, the Islamic kingdom of Demak in West Java utilized the trade route through the Strait of Sunda, along Sumatra's west coast, and into the Indian Ocean thence sailing westward. Demak's diversion enriched Aceh. Aceh then begun to flex its muscle to subsequently dominate Sumatra's north-eastern coast assuming control over several pepper ports.

Aceh's 'golden age' was the first half of the seventeenth century during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607-36), who adopted the pretentious title of 'Mahkota Alam' (lit. 'Crown of the Universe'), implying himself as the 'Universal Ruler'.

He reigned over a prosperous city [Banda Aceh] and a strong kingdom that thrived because of his achievements in the development of international trade and commerce, political expansion and the establishment of close relations with foreign Islamic kingdoms that not only strengthened Aceh's military forces but also intensified the kingdom's religious faith. The regions along the western and eastern coasts of Sumatra acknowledged the power of Aceh. Johor ... was forced to acknowledge the authority of the Acehnese sultanate. Aceh's international trade networks encompassed England, France, India, Africa, Egypt, Turkey, Arabia and the Middle East, China, and Japan. ... [the sultan] was said to be the richest king in the region, with his large income derived from trade revenues and customs duties (Tjandrasasmita 2004, 120).

Sultan Iskandar Muda's demise followed by the brief reign of Sultan Iskandar Thani (r. 1636-41) precipitated the decline of Aceh's power and influence. Coincidentally, Portuguese Melaka then (1641) fell into the hands of the Dutch United East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, VOC).

The Portuguese seizure of Melaka forced the flight of the last Malay Muslim ruler southward down the peninsula. Consequent of Portuguese harassments and Acehnese assaults, the royal refugees relocated their base from the Johor River estuary to the offshore island of Bintan (Bentan) in the Riau Archipelago. With assistance from the ever-loyal Orang Laut, the Malays regained their strength with the emergence of the Johor-Riau Empire. Malay ambition unwaveringly focused on the resurgence of Malay Muslim Melaka and hegemony over the Straits. Eliminating other contenders was paramount, and between rivals, Portuguese Melaka and Aceh, the latter seemed a greater threat to Johor-Riau rulers. The Malay base on the Johor River had suffered repeated sackings from the Acehnese, viz. 1564-5, 1613, and 1615. But such beatings did not dampen Malay resolve. Johor-Riau repeatedly revived its power to again challenge Portuguese Melaka and Aceh, both regarded as 'usurpers' of Malay Muslim Melaka.

Unlike the Portuguese, the Malay rulers of Johor-Riau as direct descendants of the royal Melaka line, were able, to some extent, claimed suzerainty over the latter's vassals, patrimonial benefices, and tributary states on the peninsula and in south-central Sumatra. But not all these polities readily acknowledged Johor-Riau's suzerainty. Nonetheless, the Johor-Riau Empire stretched from present

day Johor, Riau on Bintan, Klang, Muar, Batu Pahat, Singapore, Pulau Tinggi off the east coast of the peninsula to the Karimun islands, Bulang, Lingga and Bungaran islands, and territories on Sumatra, that of Bengkalis, Kampar and Siak. For close to three decades, based at Batu Sawar (c. 1587-1615), on the Johor River estuary, Johor-Riau was the principal power of the Straits' southern corridor, a counterpart to Aceh's in the north, and offered an alternative trading centre to Portuguese Melaka for Muslim merchants (Borschberg 2011).

By the last quarter of the seventeenth century, Malay Johor-Riau fully came to be a semblance of its predecessor Malay Muslim Melaka in light of significant shifts in the geopolitical situation in the Straits, notably the Dutch capture of Melaka in 1641 that also coincided with the decline of Aceh. In fact, the Malays lent assistance to the VOC in unseating Portuguese Melaka, Johor-Riau's nemesis. Be it retribution or vengeance fulfilled, the Malays being party to the defeat of the Portuguese, its Dutch ally in return, accorded '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' by the close of the seventeenth century (Andaya 2004, 699).

In retrospect, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was not a single power, whether Portuguese Melaka, Aceh, or Malay Johor-Riau, that succeeded in asserting *sole* dominance over the Straits. Like earlier centuries, the Straits continued to be the principal maritime route for East-West trade, and the socio-cultural 'bridge' across the Malay World. The three protagonists, each during their respective ascendancy, partook of the economic profits from the Straits. Trade then remained the common denominator amongst the three contenders. Paradoxically, it was neither the Portuguese in Melaka or the Acehnese nor the Malays of Johor-Riau, that in the long run, reaped the benefits of two centuries of struggle, instead new players, namely the VOC and the English East India Company (EEIC), were to emerge the *real*/hegemonic beneficiary over the Straits in the subsequent centuries.

### **The Straits Equated to a Dutch 'Lake'**

Commencing from the seventeenth century, the Straits witnessed the arrival of new players, namely English and Dutch traders, mainly under the aegis of the EEIC and VOC respectively. But the EEIC's presence, however, was short-lived; it withdrew from the mid-1620s from the region leaving a single outpost at Bengkulu (Bencoolen, established in 1685) on the west coast of Sumatra. Until the opening of Penang (1786), off the northwest coast of the Malay Peninsula, the Straits from the second half of the seventeenth century almost resembled a 'Dutch lake'. The Bugis, a formidable rival, were on the horizon, who migrated into the region, and proved to be significant economic and political players, that unquestionably became a thorn to the VOC.

The singular mercantile ambition of the VOC was to establish monopolistic practices over a range of commodities of the Straits and the East Indies that were demanded in the European market. Dutch expectations commanded full control over production, collection, shipment, and marketing of the major commodities: cloves and nutmegs of Maluku, and pepper of Sumatra. Maluku or The Moluccas, the famed 'Spice Islands', was the VOC's initial preoccupation with a base on Ambon in close proximity to the spice-producing islands with peeled eyes over production, collection, and shipment. Ambon's location, however, was 'off' the international seaborne trade route between South and East Asia, where the Dutch also had vested interests (Prakash 1985; Suzuki 2012). Melaka proved to be an ideal alternative, but then it was under the Portuguese. Other possibilities include Banten in West Java, and a trading post in nearby Jayakarta (Jacatra, present day Jakarta).

Meanwhile, in order to partake a piece of the lucrative spice trade, the EEIC negotiated with local rulers for setting up 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. Staunch advocates of free market, the EEIC was a continuous irritant to VOC's attempt to dominate the spice trade, from production to marketing. VOC Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen (t. 1617-23), following aborted attempts to secure a monopoly of pepper from Banten, decided on Jayakarta as his headquarters, having defeated the local ruler. In 1619, Coen

renamed the place Batavia (Betawi) that subsequently witnessed the beginnings and ascendancy of the Netherlands (Dutch) East Indies (present day Indonesia).

The short-lived Anglo-Dutch truce (1620-3) did little in deterring the English from transgressing VOC rules whilst in Batavia in 1620, likewise from trying to break the VOC monopoly in Banda in 1621 (van der Eng 2004, 359). Due to a combination of increasing Dutch pressure, stiff competition in the spice trade, and taking geopolitical considerations into account, the court of King James I (1566-1625) prompted the EEIC Directors in London to consider pulling out altogether from the East Indies. The situation in Europe saw England favouring Dutch independence from Hapsburg Spain; a Dutch triumph to a large extent would be a bulwark to the security of England vis-à-vis a dominant continental power (Tarling 2004, 158). The Ambon Massacre (1623) offered a pretext for a hastened withdrawal, thereby leaving the Dutch full sway over the East Indies trade; EEIC's loss was VOC's gain (see Bassett 1960, 1-19).

Portuguese demise in Melaka ensured the consolidation of VOC's monopolistic agenda. Coen had attained control over the Sunda Strait, and logically, dominance over the Straits as well would crown the Dutch as the paramount power of the region. A prudent alliance with Malay Johor-Riau, enabled the Dutch in ejecting the Portuguese from Melaka in early 1641. But seizure of Melaka, the Dutch realized (as the Portuguese did 130 years ago), did not translate to the continuous flow of commodities from the numerous collecting centres, feeder ports, and entrepôts, the traditional trading networks that both Malay Buddhist Srivijaya and Malay Muslim Melaka were able to tap and sustain. Instead, the trade of Dutch Melaka contracted, and revenues could barely match expenditure during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Lewis 1995, 135-139). But the unfavourable economic returns of Dutch Melaka could also be due to an overall shift in the locus point of seaborne trade to Batavia; the Sunda Strait, in place of the Straits, could prove to be an important and viable alternative trade route (Lewis 1995, 17-18).

The local indigenous networks of collecting centres, feeder ports, and entrepôts remained intact in the Straits during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Of equal importance was in the servicing of these networks by the mutually beneficial interactions between coastal ports and indigenous producers of the interior. Essentially, it was incumbent upon the VOC to establish mutually beneficial relations with native states in order to have access into this network.

Alongside the Dutch ... were a number of other [indigenous] states who continued to act as feeder ports and supply points into the wider trading circuits. The Dutch strength in the international market was critical to the success of this network of smaller ports. Only the Dutch had the naval, shipping and financial strength to trade on the European market. But the collection of the products needed for trade – products still, as before, drawn from the local, China and India market, depended on the continued success of the traditional port towns and cities of the region (Cleary & Goh 2000, 97).

It was clearly evident that the traditional economic players in the Straits, viz. Acehnese, Malays, Minangkabaus, Indian Muslims, Chinese, Javanese, Orang Laut, remained active and relevant. Aceh and the Johor-Riau Empire as well as the smaller coastal states and ports in the vicinity of the Straits, continued to survive and partake from the regional seaborne trade.

The Bugis, from their homeland in Sulawesi, made their presence in the Straits during the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The Bugis were famed as accomplished seafarers, traders, and warriors. The Dutch sought the monopoly of the spice trade (nutmeg, cloves, and mace) of Gowa, a Makassarese kingdom in South Sulawesi. Failing which, the VOC sought the assistance of Bone, with the consequence of cowing Gowa in 1669. Dutch action set in motion a series of Bugis migration; many from a defeated Gowa fled to the western Malay Archipelago, settling and seeking their fortune in Java, Sumatra, and the southern parts of the Malay Peninsula. 'From the Riau [A]rchipelago', many of the Bugis 'settled in the vicinity of the Johor court, at a strategic meeting point of the local and international trade routes, they extended their activity in various directions, including that of the Malay [P]eninsula' (Pelras 1996, 145). Their intervention in Johor-Riau and Selangor in the 1730s entrenched their presence, influence, and importance. Defeat of the Minangkabau-Orang Laut

alliance saw Bugis ascendancy in the political realm, where they supplanted the Malay elite, and economic domain, where they displaced the Orang Laut (Andaya 1975; Andaya 2004, 699).

Towards the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Straits remained, as in preceding centuries, a bridging force through trading links and political ties on either shores. Local *nakhoda* of Malay, Orang Laut, Acehnese, and Bugis descent, continued the centuries-old activities of small-scale, short-distance, coastal trading in the estuaries, coasts, and islands scattered across the vicinity of the Straits, interweaving and strengthening the traditional economic, socio-cultural, and political linkages. Neither the displacement of the Portuguese by the Dutch at Melaka, or Bugis influence in the Johor-Riau Empire, had any *real* impact on the centuries-old native network of coastal and regional trade and political vassal-client relations between the larger entrepôts and their subordinate and secondary ports. But change was beckoning on the horizon of the Straits.

English 'Country trade', and 'country traders' (Turnbull 2004, 389-390; Lewis 2009, 49-59), relatively newcomers, gradually transformed the nature and character of local and international trade in the Straits culminating in the opening of the English trading outpost of Penang in 1786 that had the command of the northeast entrance to the Straits. Not coincidentally but a premeditated move, Penang's establishment owed to a determined English country trader named Francis Light (1740-1794) who, on a sunny August morning, unilaterally landed on the island's northeast promontory, and declared formal possession in the name of his sovereign, King George III (1738-1820), christened a proposed township, George Town, and the island, as Prince of Wales Island (For the establishment of Penang as an EEIC trading outpost, see Gin 2019).

The EEIC's lucrative China trade in luxuries begun in the last quarter of the seventeenth century with an initial 'factory' (trading post) on Formosa (Taiwan) established in 1672 with accessibility limited to ports at Guangzhou, Xiaman, and Zhoushan (Wild 2000, 34-48; van Dyke 2007). However, three decades later, this cumbersome cross-straits arrangement was replaced by a factory in Guangzhou itself. Although forced to submit to numerous restrictions and prohibitive trading terms, the high profits of Chinese luxuries overrode all inconveniences. Initially, Manchester woollens and Indian cottons were exchanged for the highly priced tea, exquisite porcelain (chinaware), and fabulous silk. But English manufactures proved unpopular hence unsustainable in the Chinese market that, in turn, meant a drain of English silver for Chinese luxuries, resulting in a severe trade imbalance. Opium, then traditionally used in Chinese medicines, posed as an alternative to offset the outflow of silver, and at times, even brought in profits (Greenberg 2008, 104-143). Trade in opium was in the hands of private English traders, whereas the EEIC administered production in plantations in India. Opium, a debilitating drug, wasted addicts, and this unbearable consequence prompted an imperial edict in 1729 proscribing its importation and sale. Avaricious-centred collaboration between corrupt Qing provincial officials, insatiable *Co-hong* (merchant guild) members, and foreign (including English) merchants, that among themselves partook indecent high profits from the opium trade, brushed off the emperor's prohibition despite the horrific capital punishment imposed on recalcitrants.

From the eighteenth century, this non-Indian country trade was undertaken by the EEIC's officials themselves in their private capacity, a practice formally approved, recorded, and an activity where taxes were duly paid. India-based licensed English merchants too joined the country trade bandwagon as well. By the mid- eighteenth century when the EEIC's China trade flourished, it spurred country traders further eastwards to the East Indies to explore possibilities of trade goods attractive in the China market, in particular the various varieties of exotic jungle products and sea produce that the Chinese utilized in medicinal cures, often of presupposed aphrodisiac properties, and/or culinary delicacies. From the 1780s, country traders were the major conveyers of EEIC farmed Indian opium to the Chinese ports. Prior to the emergence of Penang, Riau island, base of the Johore-Riau Empire, served as an important centre for English country traders.

Thanks to Bugis aegis since the 1760s, Riau on Bintan, developed into a leading entrepôt on the southern approach to the Straits. Further to 'The natural advantages of Riau,' as noted, 'were now reinforced by widespread trading network set up by the Bugis within the [Malay] Archipelago' (Lewis 1995, 67). Initially, trading was in traditional tropical products sourced from the immediate

hinterlands of spices and jungle products, then, from the mid-eighteenth century, tin, pepper, and gambier (dyestuff for textiles) became increasingly prominent trade commodities; tin and gambier for the Western markets, and pepper, mainly for the Chinese market. For the greater part of the eighteenth century, Bugis Riau's strategic location as a half-way house between China and India with less restrictive and punitive taxes made it an attractive regional trading centre servicing the international East-West trade through the Straits.

Progress in the China trade, in turn, made country trade essential, and at the same time, radically transformed the character and participants of the local and regional trade in and around the Straits and beyond (Lewis 1970, 114-130). When English country traders sourced goods from local native producers in exchanged for Western manufactures such as metal goods and textiles, they turned into intermediaries between short-distance, coastal trade and long-distance, international trade. English country traders increasingly usurped the pivotal and profitable role hitherto in the hands of traditional Chinese and Malay middleman subsequently leading to adverse implications, particularly for the latter. Conspicuously, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, Westerners had dominated both the regional and international trade of the Straits.

The significance of the country trade prompted strategic moves initiated in the 1780s by perennial rivals, the EEIC and VOC. Success and prosperity of Bugis Riau provoked a Dutch offensive and seizure in 1784 resulting in politically and economically emaciating the Bugis. Nevertheless, the Dutch failed to replicate the collective skills and entrepreneurship of the Bugis, Malays, and Chinese that had contributed to Riau's incomparability. On the contrary, Dutch intervention destined Riau's demise. 'The Batavian government', it became obvious, '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, 110).

In the interim, the EEIC on its part, was in urgent need of a permanent base in the vicinity of the Straits (Bassett 1964, 122-140). It was courtesy of the country trade that had sustained the ever-profitable China trade that prompted the EEIC's intention for a regional base of operations. The fact that Dutch Melaka and Batavia were in control of the central and southern parts of the Straits respectively made all East Indiaman (English vessels) plying the India-China trade route suffer at the mercy of Dutch ports for re-provisioning and repairs.

Commerce aside, strategic considerations came into play.

The geopolitical situation then [last quarter of the eighteenth century] 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 Aceh, alarming the EIC. Meanwhile Sultan Abdullah [of Kedah] was equally anxious to seek military assistance against his Siamese overlord. [Chakri] Siam was on the verge of being invaded by [Konbaung] Burma (Gin 2004, 1048).

Consequently, Penang was established. Its opening as an EEIC trading outpost was borne of the personal ambition of English country trader Light, and the misplaced trust Sultan Abdullah Muharum Shah (1773-1798) in appointing him (Light) as *wakil* (representative) in negotiations with Calcutta that subsequently led to Kedah's loss of Penang to the EEIC lest the sultanate's request for military protection in return (Gin 2019, 3).

The rather enthusiastic high hopes of Penang being a flourishing trading port, however, rapidly fizzled out. Trade grew steadily, but not spectacularly, as was eagerly anticipated (Hussin 2009, 69-104). Plans to make Penang into a naval base was aborted after 1810; victory at the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) ruined any French moves and/or threat in the Bay of Bengal as well as the Straits. Proposals of Penang as a centre for accommodating ship repairs and shipbuilding had to be shelved owing to the paucity of suitable wood, labour shortages, and prohibitive investment in infrastructure. Meanwhile, Light's efforts in attempting to transform Penang into a 'second Moluccas' too was not realized consequent of unforeseen circumstances, viz. spice plantations on the island failed due to planters' inexperience, diseases, and low market prices due to poor global demand.

On hindsight, Penang was, in fact, in dire straits with major issues to overcome. Although its location enabled it to command a sizeable share of the economic pie in the northern corridor of the Straits, Penang was too distant to partake from the central and southern parts that were confidently in Dutch hands. Its position in the far north denied Penang's ability to watch over Dutch Melaka, what more of Dutch assets in Batavia, some 2,000 km away. The Napoleonic Wars (1803-15) that forced the Dutch royal House of Orange to sought refuge in London from French occupation saw the sanctioning (Kew Letters) (Lenman 2004, 723; Israel 1995, 127) of British temporary control and occupation over Dutch possessions in the East, further adversely impacted on Penang. Hence, between 1810 and 1816, the British occupied Melaka, Padang in southern Sumatra, Batavia and Java, and Maluku. Meanwhile, the British also occupied the Cape Province (in present day South Africa) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Penang's free port that had once attracted traders who shunned the prohibitive dues of Dutch ports, regretfully, returned to those ports now under British administration. The geopolitical landscape in Europe in the post-war aftermath coupled with the acquisition of Singapore in 1819, literally obliterated all of Penang's pretensions of ever being *the* major entrepôt of the Straits.

The latter part of the eighteenth century and the advent of the nineteenth century witnessed new and radical developments with antecedents in the preceding century. Instead of prioritizing markets, the Industrial Revolution pushed both the Dutch and the British to assert greater involvement in local native affairs including political considerations, even involving territorial acquisition, if deemed politically and/or strategically expedient. A paradigm shift was in motion, increasingly moving industrial and production-orientated interests, in place of hitherto mercantilist considerations, as the nineteenth century emerged.

### **From 'Bridge' to 'Fence': Transformation of the Straits**

The post-Napoleonic War period witnessed a Britain keen, not only in political support for the newly established Kingdom of The Netherlands, but also expanded efforts in revitalizing the shattered economic fortunes of the Dutch. London's intention was essentially strategic: averting another French occupation of the Low Countries to threatening Britain, only a narrow channel as defense. The Convention of London (1814) sought to boost and sustain the Dutch kingdom's economic viability hence its political strength in Europe through its possessions in the East Indies. Accordingly as agreed (Kew Letters), Britain restored Melaka, Padang, Java, and Maluku, former VOC acquisitions, to the Dutch government. Although a noble gesture, post-war restoration of Dutch possessions was literally a slap in the face to captains of East Indiaman, who again had to rely (out of necessity) on Dutch ports, and tolerate (of expediency), Dutch treatment, for the sake of the ever lucrative China trade. Uneasiness, and even ambivalence, prevailed among British official circles, likewise gentlemen in the City, on the issue of post-war restoration (Tarling 1962).

Stamford Raffles (1781-1826), as lieutenant-general of Java during the brief British occupation (1811-15), envisaged the extension of British hegemony over the entire Malay Archipelago governed on liberal principles and free trade practices, regarded as a panacea to Dutch monopolistic domination (Turnbull 2004, 1122-1123). His visionary ambition urged him to identify a suitable strategic base with a two-prong aim, namely to check Dutch activities, and in turn, to expand British control, viz. 'a general right of superintendence over, and interference with, all the Malay states' (Tarling 1993, 26). But Raffles' efforts in utilizing Bengkulu as a base for launching his ambitious foresight met with opposition from the EEIC, then towing Whitehall's intention for a Dutch revival in the East Indies. Meanwhile, Governor-General the Earl of Moira (1813-23) at Calcutta sanctioned Raffles' suggestion of negotiating for treaty relations with Aceh, and permission to explore possibilities of sites as a trading station strategically positioned at the southern entrance to the Straits.

A keen student of the Malay world, of its history, socio-cultural heritage, flora and fauna, Raffles focused on the island of Singapore, the ancient trading polity of Temasek. Singapore seemed to be a promising alternative to Riau. Utilizing the Strait of Singapore, ships sail directly northwards up the

Straits bypassing the treacherous and circuitous Riau-Lingga Archipelago where piratical activities abound.

At that time, the *Temenggong* of the Johor-Riau Empire, wielded authority over Singapore, consequent of the death of Sultan Mahmud in 1812 that led to an unresolved succession struggle between two offspring of non-royal mothers, Abdul Rahman and his elder step-brother, Hussain (Trocki 1979, 36-39). Then in 1818, the Dutch took the initiative in contracting a treaty with Bugis-backed Abdul Rahman; in return for recognition of him as the sole legitimate heir to the throne at Riau, the Dutch was permitted to re-establish a factory there.

A year later, in 1819, Raffles made his move to acquire Singapore as the site for 'a trading station strategically positioned at the southern entrance to the Straits' to oversee Dutch activities and influence. Firstly, a treaty with the Temenggong allowing for a factory on the island. Secondly, for royal sanction, a formal agreement was penned with Hussain, whereby the British legitimized him as the rightful ruler of the Johor-Riau Empire on the Johor mainland, a means to side-line Dutch-sanctioned Abdul Rahman. Raffles' highhanded action over the claimant issue as well as a fluttering Union Jack over Singapore received vehement protests from Batavia, The Hague, and Amsterdam. But the Dutch restrained from taking further action.

Prior to the momentous Treaty of London (1824), the situation in the Straits and the whole Malay Archipelago were exclusively in the hands of Whitehall mandarins, with lesser power held by Dutch bureaucrats at The Hague. As mentioned, even before the emergence of Singapore (1819), Westerners, mainly the British, wielded near monopoly over regional and international trade in and around the Straits. It was apt that the two 'exclusive Lords of the East', a term coined by British Foreign Secretary George Canning (1807–09, 1822–27) in referring to Britain and the Netherlands, oversee the entire region – the Malay Archipelago-insular Southeast Asia – between them.

As earlier pointed out, the Convention of London (1814) spurred deep anxieties within British official circles that saw the return of Dutch possessions in the East Indies meant a return to the pre-war Dutch exclusive monopolistic practices that excluded all others. But from a strategic point of view, undoubtedly and even more importantly, was the fact of Dutch control over the greater part of the Straits, Melaka on the eastern shore, and Padang, the western shore. Almost nightmarish in strategic terms, Whitehall was determined to insist on retaining Singapore, at least to thwart Dutch hegemonic designs.

A settlement of the aged-old Anglo-Dutch rivalry issue was urgently needed at this juncture in 1819. Foreign Secretary Lord Castlereagh (1812-22), spelled out Britain's intent and expectation.

... 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 ... (as quoted in Tarling 1993, 27).

The Treaty of London (1824), or the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, decisively resolved the aforesaid anxieties and concerns. 'The essence of it', namely the Treaty, '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 1962, 161). A mutual trade-off by both parties.

In territorial terms, Bengkulu in exchange for Melaka, and formal acknowledgement of the British occupation of Singapore. It was here that witnessed the transformation of the Straits, from a 'bridge' to a 'fence'. The Treaty dictates an imaginary plum line running in north-south direction along the Straits whereby, northwards of the line denotes the British sphere of influence that included the peninsula, and southwards, the Dutch realm of Sumatra, Java, and others.

The Treaty made it clear that the Malay Archipelago was an *exclusive* British and Dutch domain, excluding all others. The term, ‘exclusive Lords of the East’, was amply demonstrated here, both in theory and in practice, and precisely and importantly, achieved what Whitehall had intended.

Unilaterally decided by the two ‘exclusive Lords of the East’ in faraway London, the Straits was re-assigned a new role, on a new stage, of a new play, functioning as a ‘fence’, far divorced of its past function as a ‘bridge’, a unifying force. Physically and symbolically, the Straits was *the* fence separating the British sphere from the Dutch. The former comprising the Malay Peninsula and Singapore, that subsequently evolved into ‘British Malaya’, and the latter, Sumatra and the entire Malay Archipelago, that became the ‘Dutch East Indies’. Both realms marched to different colonial drumbeats, in accordance to the dictates of their respective ‘Lord’.

## Conclusions

Prior to 1824, before the forceful dictates of Western imperialism and colonialism, the Straits acted as a bridging force with the economic factor (trade and commerce) nurturing and enriching the socio-cultural matrix in its vicinity and throughout the Malay Archipelago. Trade networks and linkages, from local, regional to international, overlapped and criss-crossed the Straits’ region rendering it as a unifying, all-embracing coalescing force. The focal centre of this economic activity became conspicuous with the emergence of Srivijaya, and thereafter, Melaka. In spite of fragmentation during the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, economic intercourse continued to fuel the socio-cultural milieu of the Malay Archipelago that gradually evolved into what became recognized as the ‘Malay World’, the greater part of insular Southeast Asia. The beginnings of the nineteenth century beckoned a new dawn whereby the Malay Archipelago, the Malay World, and in turn, insular Southeast Asia, became the ‘playground’ of two ‘exclusive Lords of the East’, the British and the Dutch. The Treaty of London (1824) served the needs of both ‘Lords’, and in turn, transformed the role of the Straits, from a socio-cultural bridge to a colonial political and strategic fence. Present day nation-states of Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and Indonesia were borne from this colonial partitioning.

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