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Singapore Perspectives 2019
Singapore.World
Monday, 28 January 2019
Sands Expo and Convention Centre

Institute of Policy Studies

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Panel I: Singapore and the World

China and Singapore's region

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Southern Eurasia

The maritime trade between the western end of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea was led by Indians, Persians and Arabs and connected with the archipelagic peoples astride the Sunda and Malacca Straits. The Chinese responded and became one of the largest trading communities in Southeast Asia. Their activities southwards and westwards in the Nanyang led them to see the centrality of the waters around the Malay Peninsula. When the British opened Singapore to a free trade system, Chinese traders were quick to respond. Together with many others in the region, they acted as precursors to a modernising China after the 19th century.

The classic image of China is the world of the Yellow River where core ideas emerged from the plains of Hebei, Henan and Shandong and the uplands of Shanxi and Shaanxi, the cradle zones of Chinese civilisation. There was very little about the south. When that China looked south, there were at least three *souths* —the southeast, the southwest, and the lands further south in Southeast Asia. Most of the south were peopled by what northerners called the "Hundred Yue", *Baiyue* 百越 or "Southern Man" *Nan Man* 南蠻. Those of the southwest were separately described as "Southwest Man" *Xinan Man* 西南蠻. There was no single name for peoples further south but they included peoples from afar who came to trade at the riverine ports of Yue territory as well as the upland towns of the Southwest.

The Qin and Han rulers conquered the lands of the *Baiyue*. These lands later attracted large numbers of settlers from the north. The authorities left most of the *Xinan Man* alone. The most important changes came during the 4th century when invasions by the ancestors of peoples later known as Turkic, Tibetan and Mongol brought Han China to an end. Through collaborations between these invaders and Han people, they established a series of northern dynasties. The Han who refused to accept that moved south across the Yangzi.

There was thus a new "China" under a succession of four Southern Kingdoms. But it was the Sinicised descendants of the northern dynasties that brought "south China" back into the fold. By the Tang dynasty, the economy of the Yangzi delta region was highly developed and the empire's growth centres shifted southwards. With growing wealth and cultural confidence, these *Tangren* in the south could say that they were more Chinese.

Another period of division followed when Khitan, Tangut, Jurchen and Mongol forces in succession pressed the Han Chinese of the Song to move its capital south of the Yangzi. There the southerners concentrated on building the Song Kingdom, and redefined the idea of *tianxia* by reinterpreting the Confucian Classics and drawing on the wisdom of Buddhist and Daoist thinkers and practitioners. With this revived Confucianism, they claimed to have saved the core values of civilization. This was achieved because the enterprising southerners developed the economic potential of the coasts, and combined that with the cultural authority of those who had come south over the centuries. The separation enabled the south to gain its own authoritative voice and gave its literati the right to shape the future China. But the Song Chinese failed to put a broken China back together again. When Kublai Khan conquered the kingdom, China was again unified but, this time, it was northern *non*-Chinese who ruled *all* of China.

This reintegration of China's south was a total success. The Mongols also incorporated the lands of the southwest *Man*, notably the Dali kingdom bordering Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. Thereafter, the Ming and Qing empires steadily dismantled the autonomous chieftainships of that region. Today, officials appointed by Beijing control the towns and prefectures where minority peoples may hold key administrative positions. The last two dynasties kept China united while the Qing emperors pushed north and west to create a larger empire across Eurasia and redraw the map of China.

China's south

The elite families who moved to the south retained as much as they could of the cultural traits that their ancestors had brought with them. But over time, these *Tangren* adapted to living in terrains quite different from those in the north. Most of them settled in the valleys of smaller rivers that flowed into the East China and South China Seas. These were separated by high hills and evolved into different kinds of communities. Those at the river mouths developed trading centres, some large enough for them to establish local kingdoms during periods of division, for example, Qiantang River of the Wu Yue kingdom in the 10th century and later the Southern Song; the Min River and the kingdom of Min of Fujian; and rivers like Jiulong and Han, where Hokkien and Teochiu speakers established ports and shipping centres that produced some of the most adventurous traders of the China Seas. Beyond that, the Pearl River delta produced the famous kingdom of Nan Yue with its capital in Guangzhou. And then another riverine state, Lo Yue, kingdom of the Red River, whose chiefs were later able to establish the independent kingdom of Dai Viet (now Vietnam).

These southern kingdoms became sites for riverine states but they could never combine their power to reunify all of China. It is interesting to see that large parts of southern China developed under riverine conditions similar to those of the mainland parts of Southeast Asia where port cities also became the capitals of strong states. The best examples were the port towns along the coast of central Vietnam where small rivers flowed into the South China Sea. The trading centres functioned as a distinct polity known as Linyi and later as Champa. Similarly, the maritime polity of Funan became part of the Khmer state of the great Mekong river that grew to become the Angkor empire. And, further west, there arose along the Menam river the Siamese state that was strong but never secure against enemies from their west. There the delta areas of the Salween and the Irrawaddy rivers protected the interior where the upland Burma established their kingdoms.

Foreign traders coming to China were always welcome but Chinese merchants went south in their own ships only after the 10th century. The Mongol invasion unleashed China's outreach by using the Song navies to look for more places to conquer and attacked Japan, Vietnam, Champa and Java. Kublai Khan did all this 120 years before Zheng He. By the time the Chinese became one of the largest groups trading between China and the Indian Ocean, the Ming dynasty decided to integrate all foreign trade in a tributary system to control all

foreign trade. However, the entrepreneurs of Guangdong and Fujian continued to trade privately whenever they could.

The southern elites tended to look north to the power centre in Beijing while their merchant compatriots saw their wellbeing linked to the South China Sea ports. The merchants took great risks in their enterprise, but their potential for China's economic development was rarely appreciated. The consequences of this neglect became obvious in the 19th century. Even after two Opium Wars, the literati were confident that the southern borders were manageable and could not see that radical changes further south and west had become an existential threat to their civilisation.

In the 20th century, the traditional elites were replaced by a generation who looked to the West for enlightenment, notably in the sciences and commercial and industrial enterprises. Seeking modernisation, they wanted to learn everything they could to make China strong and prosperous again. The new national consciousness also sought to revive a sense of pride in Chinese past achievements, something like the "China dream" that leaders from Sun Yat-sen down to Xi Jinping were to share. At the dream's core was the integration of the Chinese nation as *Zhonghua minzu*, backed by enterprising southerners who mastered new methods to take advantage of economic opportunities. However, young idealists objected to anything linked to foreign capitalists and sided with the Chinese Communist Party. That new China led by Mao Zedong adopted revolutionary goals that reversed the earlier modernisation efforts and returned to some traditional positions whereby political and military elites allowed the southerners only peripheral roles in the country's development.

Deng Xiaoping's decision to open up the economy to the outside world was a game-changer. By recognising how much the market economy depended on an open maritime outlook, he enabled China to develop at astonishing speed since the 1980s. This was a great leap forward for China's entrepreneurs who played a vital role in that transformation. In addition, it also led the CCP leaders to proclaim that they need naval power to protect their widespread economic interests. Although power is still centralised in Beijing, the openness that southerners have always wanted has stimulated high levels of dynamism in the economy. The country now understands the need to defend China's maritime interests but needs to do more to unleash the energies of its venturesome southerners.

The Region's new future

The changing conditions further south whether at sea or on land clearly require China's close attention. The post-war Anglo-American powers saw Southeast Asia as potentially the centre of a new strategic zone. This region has an extraordinary history. From a number of trading kingdoms and autonomous port-cities, they became territories dominated by the West. But their peoples kept faith with their community interests and drew lessons from that period of subordination. Today, they are building nation-states with distinct identities and their leaders are keener than ever to protect their countries' sovereignty. Although this task exposes a variety of tensions within and without, the leaders have come together as members of a regional association to safeguard their interests against big power rivalries.

The region has always been diverse and had regularly fragmented into small polities for whom working together was not normal. The Vietnam War divided it into two parts. But, fear of the domino effect of a communist victory pushed Thailand and four maritime states to form the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN. After that war, ASEAN's intervention in Cambodia placed it on the side of China and made a friendly relationship possible. By the 1990s, all ten states of Southeast Asia had set aside their differences to make the organisation fully representative of the region.

China engaged the global market economy and connected vigorously with Western Europe and the United States. Its leaders moved quickly to propose an ASEAN-China Free

Trade Area and supported other initiatives to bring ASEAN commercial interests closer. This brought the South China Sea that China shares with eight of the Southeast Asian nations to the centre of that relationship. When China became the world's second largest economy and showed its determination to control its maritime claims, their island-building activities led the United States to highlight freedom of navigation for its naval forces. Together with the ideological differences between the two powers, China's claims are now presented as threats to the security of several ASEAN nations.

China's south is more open than ever but Beijing leaders remain in strict control and have discovered new ways to move forward. This has led to one of the country's biggest ideas, the "One Belt One Road" Initiative that seeks to create more opportunities for future economic growth. Its key feature is that it covers both the overland and maritime potentials across the whole stretch of the Old Eurasian World where a balanced approach is essential to advance China's long-term interests.

The overland Silk Road and the growing dependence on access to maritime ports are two sides of the vision whereby China safeguards its national goals in both directions at the same time. Nevertheless, the distinction between the overland belt and the maritime road is important and the Chinese expect that the challenges facing each half would be different. The overland Belt across Eurasia to reach markets in Europe has not been attractive for centuries. What distinguishes China's new approach is that this Belt also reaches southwards to the Indian Ocean. Here geopolitical advantage is more important and that has induced neighbouring states to join the organization.

China's south, the maritime "Silk Road" is a different story. It is now central to future economic development, and keeping the waters secure for China's maritime linkages has never been so vital. For the first time in history, the south is an existential problem for its national interests. There are at least three dimensions to the changing conditions.

Firstly, the dynamism in globalisation depends a great deal on entrepreneurs and inventive industrialists who are always more active and better appreciated in China's south. Chinese northern leaders claim to understand the need to give them fuller rein to devise the best methods for the BRI grow, but are still too prone to impose tight controls at the slightest provocation.

Secondly, the countries to China's south are now sovereign states in an overarching international system and have organised themselves to protect the region. This is not to say that ASEAN is united — it is obvious that its members are still seeking unity in several key areas. But the association has come a long way and its members understand how important it is for them to do things together. China's leaders would need to do everything they can to help them stay together and not allow outside forces to create dangerous and unnecessary divisions.

Thirdly, the South China Sea has become a source of tension between the United States and China. The subject now involves countries not bordering the sea, including US allies like Japan and Australia and some countries of the European Union. As a focal point in the US reaction to China's rise, ASEAN members know that it is more crucial than ever to be united. When the Americans redefined their strategic concerns by moving the goalposts from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, the decision made Southeast Asia more central to the competing powers. No one is certain how the threats to peace and prosperity can be eliminated. Mere regular meetings between ASEAN and its partner states may not be enough if either China or the US insists that ASEAN has to decide which sides it supports.

China's entrepreneurial classes have to face these factors confronting the Silk Road in China's south. They know the region and are unlikely to take the unity of ASEAN for granted. They also have to ensure that their northern leaders understand the demands of coastal and

maritime outreach as well as the different demands of the economies across ASEAN's land borders. The proposals to connect China's southwest provinces to the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal through Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar point to the importance of the land-sea dimensions of the BRI and the measures needed to ensure that both parts of the Initiative support each other.

Furthermore, there are now millions of settlers of Chinese descent in Southeast Asia who are loyal to their respective nation-states. Most people in south China are able to relate to these communities and know how to deal with them with care. But those responsible among the central elites, especially those of northern origins, have not found these localised communities easy to understand. If China hopes that these nationals of Chinese descent would play a positive role in their countries' relations with China, it would have to exercise sensitivity to their local interests as well as the interests of the countries where they have made their homes.

ASEAN is now being re-envisaged as a strategic zone for all the powers. This is because the economic dynamism centred in the North Atlantic for the past two centuries is moving to the southeast regions of the Old World. More recently, the shift from Europe to the Indian Ocean underlines how timely the Belt and Road Initiative is and why it is taking advantage of this development to highlight its long-term benefits to a revived Old World.

Such a move will not be straightforward as the US reacting by redefining their new strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific. For those in the Old World, the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans have always been where all kinds of Eurasian protagonists were trading for millennia, where the exchange of ideas, cultures and goods had been conducted under conditions of relative peace. Those historical relationships show how that Old World had been interconnected. A fresh review of that history would help the peoples involved to restore the conditions that had ensured that every part of that larger trading zone benefitted from the trading relations.

The Indo-Pacific as redefined by a hegemonic power on the other side of the Pacific means that Southeast Asia, as the only region that faces both oceans, will become more critical than ever. Singapore, once part of the commercial zone that connected the two halves of the Old Eurasian World, has been transformed into a global node in the Anglo-American order. Given that its location is also central to China's future in the south, the city-state would need to find new ways to perform its dual roles, one in a revived Eurasia and the other in a globalised world. It will not be doing this alone. But it will have to devote much of its energies to ensure that fellow members of ASEAN all understand the region's role and work together to avoid being destroyed by big power rivalries.

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