

## MARITIME POWER IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

The full text of the 1991 Vernon Parker Oration

by

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### INTRODUCTION

First of all let me thank you for the invitation to speak to the Australian Naval Institute. It is a great honour to be invited to speak to such a gathering of persons brought together by an interest in maritime and naval affairs.

When I first received this invitation, I asked myself what an officer from a small country, with an even smaller navy, with hardly any experience, could possibly say to such a gathering of wise and experienced people.

The approach that I will take tonight is therefore a simple one. I will attempt to look at the subject - "Maritime Power in South East Asia" - from the point of view of a small country. If I may use an analogy from economics, we are a "price taker" rather than a "price fixer"; we have practically no ability to change the geo-strategic environment in which we live and must accept what comes and try to do the best we can in the given set of circumstances.

I will begin tonight therefore with a historical survey of South East Asia. I will attempt to demonstrate that the history of South East Asia is really the maritime history of South East Asia. Of course, I have picked my examples deliberately and in the most unacademic way to support this assertion and I hope you will excuse me for doing this as I lay no claim to being an academician. This survey will help us to appreciate how we got to where we are, and will enable us to pick out constants and trends that will help us in our analysis of maritime power in South East Asia today and in the future. Let us begin.

### GEOGRAPHY AND EARLY HISTORY

South East Asia can be divided into continental South East Asia — the Indochinese countries Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, and Burma and Thailand — and maritime South East Asia which includes Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei and Singapore. Continental South East Asia lies between the two great Asian powers that have influenced this region - India and China. In continental South East Asia, the two powers have vied for power over the centuries as they attempted to expand their own influence and counter the influence of others. In the colonial period, the various occupying colonial powers superimposed their interests on the region. But even then the fault lines imposed by geography could still be seen. British and French rivalry resulted in Thailand being accepted as a neutral buffer state between British Burma and French Indochina in the 1800s. Attempts by India and China to gain influence in this area continue into the present day. China for example is quite pleased to assist Burma, and India has remained one of Vietnam's most constant friends.

But I touch on continental South East Asia only so that I can shift away quickly to what we are more interested in tonight — Maritime South East Asia.

Maritime South East Asia consists of more sea than land. There is the Malay peninsula, several large islands and tens of thousands of small islands. It is not surprising therefore that from early times, power in South East Asia was associated with maritime power. One of the earliest documented maritime empires was the Srivijaya Empire centred near Palembang

in central Sumatra. Srivijaya rose rapidly to power in the latter part of the seventh century and it extended over both coasts of the Malacca Straits, West Sumatra and western Borneo. It commanded the major trading routes within South East Asia as well as the Malacca and Sunda straits — the key routes between the Indian Ocean and the China seas.

But Srivijaya was not without its competitors. It had to face rivals from South Thailand and from as far away as India. Its influence and power eventually declined and by the early fourteenth century Srivijaya had been surpassed in maritime South East Asia by the Majapahit empire based in east Java and the Sukhothai kingdom. Both exerted claims on the Malay Peninsula and the area was in considerable turmoil. Also, by the eleventh century, Chinese trading ships had started to appear in greater numbers in South East Asia.

Out of this turmoil grew the great trading port of Malacca which was founded at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Malacca grew to become the major trading port in South East Asia. The Chinese under the Ming dynasty had decided that they would establish direct trading links in the region, and on the first of his seven great voyages to the Indian Ocean, Admiral Cheng Ho, the famous Chinese admiral, called at Malacca. China extended its protection to Malacca and this helped to deter other regional challenges to its power.

Islam, another major influence in South East Asia today, arrived with traders from India in the late thirteenth and fourteenth century, and its influence had spread to the extent that by the mid-fifteenth century Malacca, the pre-eminent trading port in South East Asia, was a Muslim sultanate.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century rivalries over control of the sea trade were once again to bring dramatic changes to South East Asia. In an effort to break the Arab monopoly on trade between Europe and Asia, the Portuguese decided to establish direct

trading links in Asia. The potential riches from the trade persuaded them to embark upon a series of expeditions to gain control of the trade by force. In 1511 the Portuguese attacked and captured Malacca.

But political changes in Europe in the 17th century and rivalry over who would control the Asian trade reared its head again and the Dutch became the fierce rivals of the Portuguese in South East Asia, eventually conquering Malacca in 1641. The English were not to be left out and they too attempted to set up their own trading ports to rival Malacca.

Even as the European powers sought to control the Asia trade, various South East Asian states too were struggling to gain supremacy in South East Asia. Sometimes they competed with and fought the Europeans, but at other times they sought alliances of convenience with which to strengthen themselves against their rivals. Aceh in North Sumatra, Johor in South Malaya and Bugis in Sulawesi were some of these rival maritime based powers.

The English gradually built up their position by establishing themselves in Benkulen in West Sumatra, Borneo and Penang; and in 1819 they established a trading post in Singapore. Dutch and English rivalries intensified, and in 1824, in the Treaty of London, the English and the Dutch established their spheres of influence using the Malacca Straits as the demarcating line; they exchanged Benkulen and Malacca. The results of this treaty of 1824 are still evident today and manifest themselves in today's Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. Dutch dominance in South East Asia was to continue until the mid twentieth century.

Elsewhere in maritime South East Asia, the Spaniards had gained control of the Philippines from the late 16th century, passing control to the Americans in the late 19th century after the Spanish American War.

During the First World War Japan was an ally

of the British. But it soon became clear that Japanese and British interests were diverging, and naval strategists in Tokyo and in London began to look at what might need to be done in the event of war.

Once again South East Asia was to be drawn into centre stage. The British constructed a great naval base in Singapore to support a main fleet that would sail east to defend British interests against Japan. Likewise the Japanese calculated that in order to succeed, they would have to destroy the American fleet in Pearl Harbor as well as wrest control of Singapore from the British. In both of these the Japanese succeeded. But as Admiral Yamamoto himself foresaw, the Japanese soon overextended themselves, and the industrial might of America carried the war to Japan and defeated them.

Following the end of the second world war, the exhausted British, Dutch and French had little choice but to allow their colonies in South East Asia to become independent. The British withdrew their forces from "East of Suez" in 1971 and left the Five Power Defence Arrangements with Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, and UK to provide a consultative framework for security in Malaysia and Singapore.

The United States was left as the strongest military power in South East Asia, and turned her attention to keeping the dominoes in South East Asia from falling to communism. The war in Vietnam did buy the other fledgling countries in South East Asia a few precious years to get on their own feet. South East Asia is now enjoying one of the fastest economic growth rates in the world.

Let us pause here for a moment to see what lessons geography and history have to offer us about the place of maritime power in South East Asia.

#### LESSONS FROM GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

From our quick survey, I would just like to

make three points. Firstly, within South East Asia, the exercise of power and influence depends on being able to make use of the seas within South East Asia. This is clearly illustrated by the long succession of competing powers who have sought to impose their will on maritime South East Asia. Each state that flourished succeeded in controlling the sea and the trade that flowed across it. As its power waned, control of the sea and of trade passed on. In the modern context, maritime power is necessary to protect the territorial integrity and other maritime interests of the South East Asian states. Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia clearly have a need to do so in order to retain cohesion among the different parts of their countries widely separated by sea. All the ASEAN states depend on the sea to carry the trade — internal and external — that powers their economies.

Secondly, South East Asia lies between the two major Asian powers, India and China. While the land route between India and China is shorter, there are many natural obstacles. The seas provide a more convenient route. Over many centuries, these two countries have left their mark on the culture, religion, language, population and politics of the region. In relatively recent times, China had been the main supporter of communist revolutionary movements throughout South East Asia. In 1979 China attacked Vietnam to "teach it a lesson" for invading Cambodia, and China has considerable influence over the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. India and China have recently been preoccupied with their own internal problems, but the sheer size of these two countries relative to South East Asia means that they must always remain a factor to be considered. As I mentioned earlier, the Chinese take pains to cultivate Indian ocean states such as Burma, and the Indians likewise cultivate South China Sea states such as Vietnam. And one can think of a variety of scenarios where the seas in South East Asia will become vital to both countries if their rivalry were to be heightened. Even if the two powers were to cooperate the main

thoroughfare would pass through South East Asia.

The third point about geography is that South East Asia is of interest to countries well beyond the region. It is rich in natural resources and its sea routes are vital for maritime traffic. The Europeans first came to South East Asia not only to secure the spices and other trade here, but also to secure trade routes to China. Today, the commodities and the countries may be different but the region is still a major source of strategic materials such as rubber, tin and oil. Japan, Europe and America depend on the routes in South East Asia for the movement of fuel, raw materials and finished products. This is true also for Australia and New Zealand especially since trade with the rapidly growing economies of Japan, Korea, China and South East Asia must all transit South East Asian waters.

What we can conclude from geography is that regardless of what South East Asian nations themselves may wish, Asian and other maritime powers do have important interests in South East Asia; and they will continue to want to assert themselves in order to ensure that their interests are not jeopardised. We cannot wish them away even though their presence here may not always totally conform with the desires of regional states to preserve their territorial integrity and security within their waters.

#### CONTEMPORARY FACTORS

While a study of the major historical trends and geography provide some useful insights on maritime power in South-East Asia, there are also more recent occurrences which impact on the subject. I will deal specifically with two major ones: the changing world geo-strategic situation and UNCLOS (the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea).

#### THE CHANGING WORLD GEO-STRATEGIC SITUATION

The last twenty to thirty years has been a period of relative stability and growth for the

countries of maritime South East Asia. While war raged in Vietnam and Cambodia, the countries of maritime South East Asia were largely insulated from its bad effects.

When viewed against the global setting, these were only part of the post World War II struggle between Communism and the Free World from which South East Asia was not exempt.

One consequence of this struggle was that regional conflicts got subsumed into the bigger game. Neither superpower was prepared to allow too great a change in the power alignments in any region, and neither superpower was willing to allow a regional conflict to escalate uncontrollably into a direct confrontation between them. This meant that regional conflicts were allowed to simmer and sometimes reached boiling point, but no major upheavals would take place.

But now the struggle is over. The world order frozen in place for 40 years has started to unravel. In maritime South-East Asia, what this means is that a question mark now hangs over the US presence which has provided the security umbrella under which the South East Asian states have prospered.

The United States finds it increasingly difficult to find the resources to maintain its force presence in South East Asia at current levels.

The medium powers also will not feel as constrained as before by the need to remain allied to one or the other of the superpowers, and can now pursue their own national interests.

While the superpowers have been locked in their struggle, things have not remained unchanged. Japan has emerged as an economic giant. In the era of the superpower nuclear rivalry she was quite content to remain a military midget as her history compelled her to eschew nuclear weapons. But now that the nuclear stand-off is over, her considerable conventional forces and sizable build-up plan,

mean that Japan is in a position to adjust her military profile to one more in keeping with her status as an economic superpower.

How can we in South-East Asia, especially the small countries, respond to this new situation? Singapore, for example, became independent only in 1965, and has lived her entire 26 years of independence within the structure of this cold-war US security umbrella. We have no direct experience of any other regime.

There are a few principles that will guide us. Firstly, as any traveller who sets out onto a journey into the unknown will tell you, prepare yourself well. This is the reason that Singapore has, since independence, been steadily investing in building up our own defence capability. The Singapore Armed Forces today is a source of strength and provides Singaporeans added confidence to face the future. Other ASEAN neighbours, particularly Indonesia share the same view - that the ASEAN countries should build-up their national resilience. With national resilience in each country, there will be no weak links in the region to exploit, and by working together, there will be regional resilience and the region will be better prepared to face the unknown.

Secondly, travel with friends - people that you know well, with whom you share common interests, and who have shown themselves to be reliable friends in the past. This is the reason why the Five Power Defence Arrangements are so important to us. FPDA provides us not only with the psychological confidence that we have friends, but also provides opportunities for us to constantly train with each other so that we can work together if we ever need to. This is the reason also, that Singapore supports a continued US presence in South East Asia. We have offered the US the use of facilities in Singapore for US fighter aircraft and naval ships. A continued US presence will provide stability in South East Asia in a period of dramatic global changes.

Thirdly, seek out on your travels new friends.

We need to seek out and constructively engage other powers that are benign and whose interests are coincident. We need to explain ourselves and try to understand them. We need, for example, to constructively engage Japan so that her foreign and security policies will evolve in a way which are mutually beneficial.

Let us shift now to another recent development that has had a significant impact on maritime power in South East Asia.

#### UNCLOS

UNCLOS has also dramatically changed the map of South East Asia. Or it might be more accurate to say that the technology of modern methods of exploiting the resources of the sea - living and non-living - have dramatically changed the way that states look upon the seas. UNCLOS attempts to balance two sets of competing demands. The first set relates to rights of passage for international shipping versus rights of coastal states to protect their territorial integrity and security. We have alluded to the tension between these two demands in the earlier discussion on geography. I believe that the UNCLOS has come to a reasonable compromise when we apply its provisions to South East Asia. While archipelagic states like Indonesia and the Philippines have safeguards for their territorial integrity and security in the archipelagic waters provisions and in the extension of the territorial sea to 12 miles, maritime states like Singapore have safeguards for passage through straits used for international navigation and archipelagic sea lanes.

To illustrate the balancing of competing demands I will use the Singapore situation as an example. The extension of the territorial sea limits to 12 miles by Malaysia and Indonesia means that Singapore, and her territorial waters are completely surrounded by Malaysian and Indonesian Territorial Waters, and that we have no access to the high seas other than through the territorial waters of our neighbours. For Singapore the access to sea

routes is particularly critical. Singapore's annual trade value is some three times her GDP, and most of it goes by sea. Compared to similar figures for Korea (75%), Australia (33%) and Japan (25%) this trade dependency is one of the highest in the world.

If not for the provisions guaranteeing transit passage through straits used for international navigation, Singapore would literally be in dire straits.

The second set of competing demands refers to the claims for exclusive economic exploitation for the coastal states. In maritime South East Asia, this means that states which never previously had boundaries with each other suddenly find that they do, and that these boundaries are not at all well defined. Who would have thought that Brunei and Vietnam have a common border, or China and Malaysia. Disputes over EEZs have already started and are likely to accelerate. The potentially mineral rich Spratlys and Paracels are the subject of competing claims. Six countries have laid claim to various parts of the Spratlys with China claiming the entire group. The claimants have backed up their claims in several cases with the deployment of military forces. Despite the efforts of Indonesia during the recent conference in Bandung where for the first time all the claimants were brought together under one roof, no resolution of the conflicting claims is in sight.

#### MARITIME POWER DEFINED

Thus far, I have been deliberately using the term "Maritime Power" somewhat loosely without properly defining it. If one were to take a narrow interpretation then it would mean the ability of a country to impose its will on another in the maritime arena. This definition implies that maritime power is associated with contention. One country's exercise of will over another means that one country is more powerful than the other, and that countries seek to maximise their power in this narrow sense.

I find this interpretation too narrow. I prefer to think of maritime power as the aggregate of a country's ability to make use of the sea in order to fulfil its national economic, security and other goals. This interpretation allows for a rather more cooperative way of looking at maritime power. Instead of imposition of wills, countries can cooperate to mutually increase their maritime power by making use of the sea in a way which they could not before.

If we were to interpret maritime power in the broader sense then there are cooperative efforts of many different types. For example, combined patrols could be conducted by maritime forces to ensure security. Combined exercises could be conducted to ensure that forces will be capable of working together should the need arise. Much is already being done in this area, with the FPDA being a good example.

But besides security related efforts, other things can be done to increase the use of the sea. The development and maintenance of a good network of ports will lead to increased trade; and a negotiated agreement on joint exploitation of mineral deposits in areas of overlapping claims would allow each country to enjoy some of the benefits rather than none of the countries being able to do so. The arrangements reached between Australia and Indonesia for joint exploitation are a good example.

#### WHAT CAN AUSTRALIA DO

Let us shift focus just slightly - towards Australia to see where Australia fits in and what Australia can do. Australia has many important interests in South East Asia. We are your nearest neighbours and an important trading partner. Your trade routes to the rest of Asia pass through South East Asian waters.

Australia has had a long history of contributions to South East Asia. In the Second World War, the Malayan Emergency, and the Vietnam War, Australian forces played important roles. Without your contributions I

am certain that the picture before us today of South East Asia would be quite different. You continue to show a strong commitment to the FPDA. We in Singapore and, I am sure also in Malaysia, very much appreciate this commitment. As partners in FPDA, it is also encouraging to note that Australia has shown a willingness to contribute forces to international operations, such as those in the Persian Gulf, to contain aggression and promote peace even in areas quite distant from Australian shores. This surely is a clear signal that Australia can be counted on as a partner to oppose aggression and preserve peace in the South East Asian region.

It is important for Australia to maintain these strong relations in South East Asia. To do so effectively, Australia needs to make use of the entire range of tools at its disposal, to build up a good network of economic, political, cultural and military relations. In this way Australia sends a clear signal that it intends to be very much a part of and a major player in the Asia-Pacific community of states; and Australia will be well positioned to influence South East Asian nations to embark on projects that are mutually beneficial.

#### **MAIN CONCLUSIONS**

Before I end, allow me to sum up. From our survey of geography and history, we concluded firstly that maritime power is important within the region for regional countries themselves in order to maintain their territorial integrity and secure their sea lines of communications.

Secondly, because of South East Asia's location between India and China these two countries cannot be ignored in the long term even if they are preoccupied with internal problems in the short term.

Thirdly, because of the importance of the South East Asian sea routes to the world trading system, and the value of the natural resources that can be found there, the major

powers in the world will always want to be able to influence events in the region. From our analysis of the changing world geo-strategic situation, our conclusion is that the US security umbrella will give way to a more uncertain situation. South East Asian countries would do well to develop national and regional resilience, to build upon old friendships and alliances like FPDA and with the US, and to seek out and develop an understanding with new players like Japan so that their foreign and security policies will develop in a mutually beneficial way.

In considering the effects of UNCLOS, we concluded that UNCLOS has made a positive contribution by balancing competing demands. But the competing claims that result from the extended territorial and EEZ regimes open new areas of potential conflict. Countries should look at Maritime Power in its widest sense, avoid contention and confrontation, and seek cooperation in order to maximise the aggregate ability of a country to benefit from making use of the sea to fulfil its national economic, security and other goals.

Finally, Australia has much to gain from being a major player in South East Asia and the larger Asia-Pacific community. Australia should use the entire range of tools at her disposal to build up a good network of economic, political, cultural and military relations.

It remains only for me to thank the Australian Naval Institute once again for this invitation and to thank you for being such an attentive audience. I shall be glad to expand on any points, and also to hear your views on this subject so that I can learn from your wisdom and experience. Thank you very much.

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