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Competing Rules-Based Orders in Southeast Asia

By Kwa Chong Guan

SYNOPSIS

The ongoing arguments about what a “Rules-Based Order” in the Asia Pacific is and who defines it appears to be a growing concern among the middle and great powers around Southeast Asia. The essentially Western liberal-capitalist order which emerged after World War II is perceived to be imperilled by a rising China acting to revise the existing Rules-Based Order. For Southeast Asians however, this discussion about Rules-Based Orders is a continuation of centuries-long issues of living within divergent Rules-Based Orders.

COMMENTARY

In 2019, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), a Track 2 network of policy institutions focussing on regional security issues in the Asia Pacific, set up a Study Group to examine the challenges to the existing rules and laws underpinning the international order in the region.

The concern is that controversy has emerged over the Rules-Based Order (RBO) we have been living with in the past half century or more, and that this controversy needs to be examined for areas where there might be consensus for change in the existing principles and institutions guiding international relations. The assumption underpinning this Study Group is that escalating great power rivalry in the region is undermining the RBO and we need to reaffirm some basic rules for order and stability in the region. The Study Group is still deliberating what constitutes an RBO four years after its establishment.

The elephant in the room is China's peaceful rise and assertions of its tianxia perspective of, in President Xi Jinping's words, “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and peaceful development of humanity” through humane authority rather than

imposition of realpolitik hegemony. This begs the question of what and whose RBO are we arguing for?

For the countries of Southeast Asia, then struggling for liberation from colonial rule after World War II, this question of what and whose RBO mattered. Should they look to the Soviet Union and its rules for a socialist order or look to America to be part of a more liberal capitalist order? The Southeast Asian countries gathered in Bandung for the historic 1955 Conference decided to align with neither the socialist order led by the Soviet Union nor the Washington liberal capitalist order, forming instead a “Non-Aligned Movement” in 1961. It was not the first time in their history that the countries of Southeast Asia were confronted with this choice of choosing between divergent regional orders.

Preceding Asian World Orders

Five centuries earlier, the Sultanates of island Southeast Asia were parts of an Islamicated world whose heartland was Safavid Persia and Ottoman Turkey. It was a Persianised world run according to Persian mercantilist practice. Being part of a Persianised mercantile world did not however prevent the Sultanates of Southeast Asia lining up to present tribute to the Great Ming State (*Da Ming Guo*, as the Ming refer to their state, not *Zhongguo* or Central State).

Despatching tribute missions to the Great Ming State made good business sense as the Great Ming had to offer reciprocal gifts of far greater value than the tribute received. The Great Ming State eventually found hosting these tribute missions from the South Seas sufficiently onerous to have to schedule their visits, with only the key states allowed to send their tributes annually.

The countries on mainland Southeast Asia west of the Mekong River were part of Theravada Buddhist ecumene in the Bay of Bengal, which looked to Sri Lanka for inspiration. From the eighteenth century they were caught in a pincer movement between an expanding British colonial order in Myanmar and a French colonial order in the east. Only Thailand, through deft diplomacy, survived this pincer movement of duelling European colonial orders.

Starting in the fifteenth century, the Sultanates in island Southeast Asia were confronted with the creeping interventions of the Portuguese trading state. Portugal may have captured Malacca, the premier emporium along the Straits of Malacca in 1511, but the Islamicated trading networks of Malacca shifted to Aceh or Johore and other Islamic port cities along the Straits of Malacca.

In the seventeenth century, the Johore sultans were confronted with the choice of aligning with the Dutch, then the rising power, against the Portuguese. For the Johore and other sultans of Southeast Asia, the challenge was about how to respond to Dutch and later British attempts to get them to sign onto treaties of alliance and friendship, and if they did, what then were the consequences of being incorporated into a European order on the sovereignty of their Islamicated polity? The Johore-Riau Sultanate was split by duelling British and Dutch colonial orders in their 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty, which effectively split the Malay world of the Riaux.

For the Sultans and other rajas of island Southeast Asian kingdoms and the Buddhist kings on mainland Southeast Asia, navigating between these divergent world orders may have been challenging and perhaps highly risky. But it also presented them with opportunities to assert their independence and place in the region. Vietnam saw itself as a Great Viet state, *dai Viet quoc*, asserting its own space in the worlds of the Great Ming and Great Qing state.

Rules-Based Orders: A Work in Progress

Southeast Asia has been an arena for its rulers to navigate their futures between alternative RBOs during the preceding millennium. All these alternative orders were successors of the thirteenth-fourteenth century Mongol Great State, *yeke ulus*, which expanded into Tibet and China via the Great Yuan State that underpinned the succeeding Great Ming State and the Manchu Great State.

To the west, the Timurid order which ruled much of modern-day Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Central Asia, the south Caucasus as well as parts of contemporary Pakistan, north India and Türkiye, claimed to be a successor to the Mongol Great State. Its legacy is claimed by the Ottomans, the Safavids and the Mughals in India.

The European colonial order based on the 1648 Westphalian concept of the sovereignty of the nation-state was the latest world order Southeast Asia had to come to terms with. For Southeast Asia, this current examination of what is an RBO and who defines it, is not a search for a definitive solution to an emerging issue, but a millennium-old work in progress. For Southeast Asia, this current search for what is an RBO and who defines it is both a challenge and an opportunity to continue to assert their claims to a place in the evolving RBOs of Asia.

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