Before Westphalia: Imagining An Alternative Asian Globalization[1]

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Abstract

The world order as it is known and understood today was built upon the foundations of imperialism and colonialism. It must be acknowledged that the very epistemologies and vocabularies that we use in the domains of diplomacy, international relations and politics are part of the legacy of Empire as well. This paper asks, is it possible for us to rethink and/or re-imagine an alternative global system that reconnects with the realities of socio-economic and socio-political life across the Asian continent and the world of the Indian Ocean prior to the arrival of Western imperialism? And, if that is indeed possible, would this also open up new opportunities for us to imagine the manner through which we – as postcolonial Asian and African scholars and subjects – represent ourselves and the 'Western Other'?

Keywords: Westphalia, Asian Globalization, Western Other, Indian Ocean, colonialism

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International Relations as Both Discipline and Praxis: The Genealogy of a Discourse

The discipline of international relations (IR) – which includes the foundational theories that have supported and sustained the discipline – is not immune to the pitfalls and shortcomings of all the disciplines that make up the humanities and social sciences. Since the beginning of IR's emergence as a discipline within the broader orbit of the humanities, it has been interrogated thoroughly, with its claims to being a social science questioned time and again. Some have argued that its genesis betrays its Western-centric leanings, while others have argued that its tendency to reduce the workings of complex nation-states to the level of individual agents and actors reveal a mode of reductionism that is unwarranted and, ultimately, impoverishing.

I would like to touch upon one aspect of IR theory that I find particularly problematic. That is, its tendency towards what has been called 'presentism': the propensity to locate all discussions on and about the behavior of states on the stage of the immediate present, and, in the course of doing so, assume that states have always behaved in the same way over time, spanning centuries of recorded human history.

To assume that states think and behave as individual actors is, in itself, already a sweeping claim, for it negates the actual reality of the deep complexity and plurality that exists in all nation-states the world over. But to assume that states behave in manners that are recognisable and predictable over time would posit the claim that all nation-states are endowed with universal qualities and similarities, which is even harder to prove, and compels us to look for counter-factual alternatives in history, in order to ask the question: was it always so?

This question is of particular importance to us – scholars of the developing world who live and work in nation-states that are built upon the foundations of earlier colonies – as we seek to explain the behaviour and choices of nation-states in Asia and Africa that may not have always followed the path taken by their counterparts in the Western world. An

example of this can be found in the present state of flux evident in maritime Southeast Asia, where many Southeast Asian states have chosen to 'hedge' between the competing demands of non-Southeast Asian superpowers such as the United States of America (USA) and China, as the two compete for dominance and hegemony across Asia. Though Western scholars and analysts have described the decisions made by many Southeast Asian governments as confounding, irrational and illogical, a quick glance at the region's history (dating back to the precolonial era) would show that 'hedging' has always been at work, such as when the smaller kingdoms and polities of the region were forced to seek means to ensure their survival in the face of far stronger powers close to the region.

Here, it must be remembered that the polities that existed in precolonial Southeast Asia were kingdoms ruled by Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu monarchs. Located at the crossroads between the East and the West, these polities behaved in a manner that reflected their own subject-positions, located as they were within the wider orbit of Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu political universes. The rulers of the region's Muslim kingdoms, in particular, were always acutely aware of the fact that their kingdoms were part of a wider, global Muslim world.

If we were to attempt a serious interrogation of the workings of IR theory in the non-Western world, there are two things that must be done. The first would be to consciously locate its origins and development within the particular historical experience of Western nation-building that led to the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the birth of the idea of the nation-state as we know it today. Second would be to assess the impact that Western expansionism in and across Asia and Africa has had on us, leaving us with a legacy – not only political but also intellectual and cultural – that has become part of our collective memory and ideological baggage and remains so today.

N. Chaudhuri, in his landmark 1990 work *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the rise of Islam to 1750*, has attempted one of the first serious excavations of the precolonial past of Asia and the Indian Ocean world. In his study of the political, socio-

economic and cultural life in precolonial Asia, Chaudhuri argues that there was once an Asian world that was broad, expansive, fluid and cosmopolitan, where the Greater Asian continent can and should be seen as a continuing land mass, stretching from Japan all the way to the Westerns shores of Europe. Prior to the rise of modern capital-colonialism that was heralded by the creation of the first colonial companies (such as the British East India Company, est. 1600, or the Dutch East India Company/*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* [VOC], est. 1602[3]) in the West, this wider and more fluid world of Asia was one that was poly-nuclear and poly-centred, with many centres of economic-political life tied together via networks of trade, migration, movement, settlement, and marriage alliances, as well as cultural and religious affinity.

The Muslim world, for instance, that stretched from North Africa across to East Asia, was not only held together by a common religious identity but also by networks of trade, migration, settlement, and ties of mutual economic support and political dependency. Within the Muslim world, there had emerged a number of important centres of learning, statecraft, commerce and culture, and it should be added here that it would erroneous for us to ever assume that the Muslim world was ever a singularity with one dominant political centre that held sway over the entire Muslim population across the world. Though Islam emerged from the Arabian Peninsula, over the centuries that followed, there appeared a number of kingdoms that furthered the advances in the arts and sciences in Northern Africa, Spain, Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, the Indian subcontinent, and all the way to Southeast Asia and China. The Muslim polities that emerged in Southeast Asia would later emerge as some of the richest in the world, with port-cities like Banten and Malacca becoming among the most prominent.

Nor can it be assumed that developments within the Muslim world were isolated from the developments taking place in the other civilisational centres around it. In the Eastern half of Asia, Muslim polities

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[3] See: Willson, 1903.

were engaged in constant trade and cultural exchange with the Mongols, China, Korea and Japan. The spread of laquerware across Asia bears the hallmarks of this long period of cultural exchange even now, and the development of Islamic art (such as the art of the Safavid period in Iran) demonstrates the extent to which Muslim artisans were learning and borrowing from their Chinese and Japanese counterparts at the time. In the Western half of Asia, Muslim philosophers and scientists were the first to discover the works of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers of old, and it was thanks to their efforts – via translation and adaptation – that the ideas of the Greeks and Romans were preserved, to be re-discovered and appropriated by Europeans later at the beginning of the Renaissance.

These various worlds – the Muslim world, the Mongol world, the Meditteranean world, the Central Asian world, and the South Asian world – all co-existed at the same time and were to be found within the larger expanse of a Greater Asia that was, up to the 16th century, border-less and open. Though the proponents of present-day globalisation continue to celebrate the new-found connectivity and mobility brought about by advances in communication technology and logistics, it has to be remembered that our distant ancestors in the 17th century were already global citizens in their own right, and lived in a world that was perhaps even more open and mobile as the one that we currently inhabit.

As Chaudhuri (1990) and Reid (1988, 1993, 2000) have shown, up to the 17th century, the wider world of Asia was one where different nations and communities co-existed (sometimes peacefully, sometimes antagonistically) on relatively equal terms. Crucially, it should be noted at this point that what is now known as 'the Western world' or 'Europe' was also plugged into that broader world as well, and that, up to the 17th century, Europeans were inclined to engage with their Asian, Arab and African counterparts as relative equals. (An example of this can be found in the account of Asia written by the 15th century European traveller Poggio Bracciolini, *India Recognita (1492),* who presented an account of an Asia that was every bit as developed and advanced as Europe at the time, if not

more.[4] Similar observations about the advanced state of Asian civilisation and development can also be found in the works of other European writers such as Ludovico de Varthema and Theodorus de Bry [1601][5]).

Up to the 17th century, 'international relations' between the myriad of kingdoms and polities across the Greater Asian continent and Africa were rendered possible thanks to the overlapping networks of trade as well as the regular transmission of ideas, languages and belief-systems. It is this long history of intercultural contact and exchange that partly accounts for the manner in which the various philosophies, creeds and languages of what is now called the Indian subcontinent spread across Greater Asia without encountering resistance or rejection, or being seen as cast as discourses that were somehow alien or foreign, as noted in the works of scholars like Coedes (1968), Steinberg (1985) and Munoz (2006). From the fourth to 16th centuries, much of the Greater Asian continent experienced the constant and regular exchange of ideas as well as commodities and peoples seemingly unhindered by notions of cultural purity or exclusivity. The legacy of this long period of intercultural exchange and contact can be seen until today, notably in the family of languages that exist across much of Asia and exhibit traces of cultural borrowing and sharing.

It could, therefore, be said that up to the arrival of the colonial-capitalist powers of Western Europe, much of Asia had developed and experienced its own form of globalisation, on terms that were local and organic and thus meaningful. This is not to suggest that during this time relations between all the kingdoms and polities of Asia was necessarily cordial all the time, for, as we know, much of the cultural exchange and spread of languages, belief-systems and populations also occurred due to conflict and conquest. Yet the conquests that took place in and across Asia – such as the Moghul conquest of India and the Mongol conquests across Central Asia and the Arab world – were somewhat different, in the sense

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[4] See: Bracciolini, 1963.
[5] See: De Bry, Johan Theodore and Johann Israel, 1963.

that these were Asian powers that not only conquered territories but also made these territories their new homes. The Moghuls would eventually make India their home, giving rise to a succession of Sultanates and dynasties that were Indian in character, as did the Mongols, who established various kingdoms that were eventually localised and which developed their own distinct identities.

This state of affairs only came to an abrupt end when the conflicts in Europe led to the rise of modern colonial companies that henceforth foregrounded the goals of economic nationalism, and when the development of colonial-capitalism in the Western part of Asia paved the way for a new world order based on contractual relations, economic nationalism and a modern mode of capital-driven colonialism and imperialism. Coming as it did at the end of the Thirty Years' War in Europe (1618-1648) and the birth of the novel Westphalian nation-state model, this new mode of empire-building would eventually disrupt the delicate order that had been in existence across Asia for centuries, bringing about ruptures that were permanent and lasting.

Modernity, Colonialism, and the Rupturing of Asia: International Relations between the Invented 'West' and the Invented 'East'

> *The attempt to separate everything from everything else is not only not in good taste but also shows that a man is utterly **uncultivated and unphilosophical.** [...] The complete separation of each thing from all is the utterly final obliteration of all discourse. For our power of discourse is derived from the interweaving of the classes or ideas with one another.* (Plato, *The Sophist*)

A cursory look at any world map today reveals a world that has been divided up and segmented along lines that are not only political but also

ethno-cultural. And yet this was not always so, and a visit to the Museum of Germanic History in Nuremberg, Bavaria, would give us a glimpse of how the world was seen in the 15th century. Martin Behaim's globe of the world, made in 1492, shows us a world without the American continent (as the Americas were not 'discovered' at the time), and places what we now call the European continent within the wider expanse of the world of Asia.[6]

Anthony Grafton (1992) notes how the 'discovery' of America led to a series of deep shocks within the collective mindset of Europeans at the time, as they realised that there existed other worlds beyond their shores that were not mentioned in holy scripture. The 'shock of discovery', as Grafton puts it, initiated a series of debates about the primacy of revealed knowledge, and gave Europeans an opportunity to venture beyond their shores, in a bid to expand their territories and acquire material riches for the sake of nation-building.[7] The ascendancies of Spain and Portugal meant that a new race for dominance and hegemony ensued in Europe, as the rival kingdoms sought to gain leverage over one another. All of this took place as Europe was emerging from the Middle Ages, and as Bartlett (1993) has shown, the dominant kingdoms and nations of the Western part of the Greater Asian continent had already begun a form of 'internal colonisation' within the confines of their own territories. In due course, nations such as United Kingdom and France would emerge, but only after they had dominated and subdued their weaker neighbours, such as the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish.[8]

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[6] Behaim's globe is of interest to us for it depicts the Pacific Ocean as a body of water that is significantly larger than it really is. But it also presents the known world at the time as a singular large land mass, with Africa connected to the rest of Asia as well.

[7] Among the points raised by Grafton in his work is the question of whether the Europeans could rely solely on revealed knowledge/holy scripture for knowledge of the terrestrial world, for the American continent was not mentioned in the Old or New Testament. The question therefore arose as to whether revealed knowledge was deficient, or whether human beings could discover more about the world than what had been revealed to them in scripture. See: Grafton, 1992.

[8] Bartlett argues that long before the United Kingdom emerged as a colonial-imperial power with the biggest empire the world had ever seen, the English had already practiced forms of internal or domestic colonial rule against other communities such as the Scottish and Irish. In his work he describes the forms of colonial conduct and praxis that the English used while they occupied

The relative equality between Europeans and Asians at the time could be seen in the nature of their contact with the wider Asian world, and the manner through which they conducted themselves when they ventured to the East. In the year 1511, the Portuguese, under the leadership of Alfonso de Alberquerque (1453-1515), managed to gain control of the Malay kingdom of Malacca on the Malay Peninsula, but theirs was not an easy victory. The men of Malacca put up stiff resistance, and in the wake of **Malacca's fall,** the Portuguese noted that the guns and canons of Malacca were as good as those that were being made in Gottingen, Germany. Even after the Portuguese had set up their outpost in Malacca, they were still compelled to seek cordial relations with the neighbouring kingdoms of Kedah, Aceh and others, for they were but a small commercial outpost based in a Malay maritime network that they could neither surpass nor control. In effect, this demonstrated the fact that, even after the Portuguese conquest of Malacca, the newly arrived conquerors were not able to bypass the pre-established network of Muslim trading states on both sides of the Malacca Strait, and had to operate within a Muslim-dominated trading network that was regional in nature. The same observation can be made about the first European merchants who arrived in other parts of Asia including Java, the Philippines, China, Japan and India, where they were obliged to negotiate with local Asian rulers and were unable to establish trading posts of their own without first obtaining permission from the local native rulers.

All of this was set to change by the 17th century, with the rise of modern colonial-capitalism, as Europe underwent a series of radical socio-political and socio-economic changes at the height of the Thirty **Years' War (1618**-1648) and witnessed the rise of new militarised corporate entities such as the British and Dutch East India Companies. Anderson (1983) has noted how modern nationalism in Europe was driven

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Ireland and parts of Scotland (such as land laws, dress codes, etc.), and shows how many of the colonial practices that would be used later in Asia and Africa were, in fact, first used in the British Isles. See: Bartlett, 1993.

by technological innovations such as the printing press as well as new modalities of capital accumulation, social communication and public administration.[9] With the emergence of new reading publics in and across Europe, the sense of national identity among Europeans grew increasingly pronounced. (It can also be noted that European identity became increasingly secular as well, as the concept of 'Christendom' – the land of the Christians – would eventually be surpassed by 'Europe', defined more in terms of political geography than religion alone.)

The birth of modernity in Europe led to a series of ruptures that would eventually lead to the division of the world along cultural-ethnic-civilisational lines. This process of separation deserves to be discussed in some detail.

As Europeans began to see themselves as a group of peoples who believed they were superior and more advanced than others, a growing sense of collective identity would emerge, later be supported by a host of pseudo-scientific theories of racial difference and civilisational hierarchies. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the combined effects of the scientific revolution, the industrial revolution, and the fruits of the Enlightenment bestowed upon Europe a sense of superiority, de-coupling the region from Asia and thereby introducing the first grand rupture, where Europe would eventually be seen as a region that was no longer attached to the Greater Asian continent but rather as a space that was somehow distinct, particular and superior.

The 'invention' of Europe as a space different from the rest of the world contributed, in due course, to European notions of cultural difference and particularity that led to its own sense of exceptionalism, grounded on the notions of superiority allegedly due to the racial-ethnic characteristics of the Europeans themselves. While earlier Europeans did indeed see themselves as different to, say, East Asians or Southeast Asians, they were less inclined to rank these differences according to a hierarchy which placed some nations above others. By the 18th century, however,

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[9] See: Anderson, 1983.

ethno-cultural differences were often framed in hierarchical terms, and this contributed to the re-imagining and framing of other (especially Asian and African) societies as inferior or backward, as noted in the works of scholars like Alatas (1977) and Berkhofer (1999).[10]

The rupture between the 'West' and the 'East' (or the 'Orient') was aided and abetted by the workings of modern information-gathering and data-collecting that were crucial elements of the modern colonial-capitalist enterprise. As Cohn (1996) and Noor (2016, 2018, 2020) show, modern colonialism was grounded on the modalities of knowledge production, data-gathering and map-making, for the vast expanse of Empire was seen and treated as a space for both commodity extraction as well as the cultivation and exploitation of human capital.[11] To that end, knowing and seeing the Asian Other *as an Other* was crucial to the colonial enterprise, and, in the course of coming to know the Asian Other, the latter was also framed as the dialectical opposite of the European self. This tendency to see and represent the Asian or African as the racial-ethnic-cultural Other to the West is seen clearly in the writings of some of the first modern colonial-capitalist scholar-colonisers who were sent to the East; it can be read of the pages of the works of Marsden (1783), Raffles (1817), Crawfurd (1820), and the like.[12] Europeans continued to travel all across Asia and Africa up into the 20th century, and although their trajectories differed little compared to their earlier predecessors, as Bosma (2011) has shown, they would – by the 19th century – be arriving as colonial masters and administrators, rather than as equals.[13]

It was throughout this period – from the early 18th to the mid-20th century – that the world was divided along geopolitical lines that served

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[10] See: Alatas, 1977; and Berkhofer, 1999.
[11] See: Cohn, 1996; Noor, Farish A., 2016; Noor, Farish A., 2018; and Noor, Farish A., 2020.
[12] See: Marsden, 1783; Raffles, 1965; and Crawfurd, 1820.
[13] Bosma, Ulbe. *Emigration: Colonial circuits between Europe and Asia in the 19th and early 20th century*, in: European History Online, Europäische Geschichte Online, EGO; http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/europe-on-the-road/economic-migration/ulbe-bosma-emigration-colonial-circuits-between-europe-and-asia-in-the-19th-and-early-20th-century

the needs of Empire. One only has to look at Southeast Asia for an example of how a pan-Asian regional network was severed (including at times by force), and where communities who had been in constant contact with one another were divided, thanks to the treaties written and signed among the colonial powers back in London, Paris, the Hague, Lisbon, or Madrid. By the end of the 19th century, both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia had been brought into different (and constantly competing) colonial economic domains and networks, whose centres were no longer in Asia but rather in the West. India, Burma, the Malay Peninsula, and Northern Borneo were integrated into the British Empire; the Indonesian archipelago was brought into the Dutch Empire; Indochina (present-day Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) became part of the French Empire; the Philippines archipelago became part of the Spanish Empire; and other parts of Southeast Asia were closely linked to the Portuguese Empire. What was once an inter-connected maritime domain where local kingdoms vied for trade and diplomatic alliances among themselves, was now a divided space whose parts were linked to wider global imperial networks not of their own making. In the course of these divide-and-rule politics, the **entire region was discursively reinvented as 'Southeast Asia', even though** it could be argued that, in the precolonial period, none of the people of the region regarded themselves as being located to the southeast of anyone.

The discursive invention of Southeast Asia as an identifiable and distinct geographical unit, populated by peoples who were in turn seen and cast as being culturally-biologically determined and different, was the logical outcome of a process of colonial territory-acquisition that dated back to the 17th century, and, as Noor (2022) shows, led to the region and its peoples being dragged into the wars of Europe.[14] Furthermore Kratoska et al (2005) and Pepinsky (2016) have shown how the invention of Southeast Asia as a geographical space cannot ever be divorced from the

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[14] See: Noor, Farish A., 2022: 1-64.

history of politics, and colonial politics in particular.[15] Edward Said (1978) was correct when he pointed out the array of Orientalist biases and stereotypes that were put to work in this long and convoluted process of framing the non-Western Other, although it can be added that while many of the cliched and stereotypical understandings of the Asian/African Other were reflective of the Orientalist bias of the day, they were also instrumental fictions useful to the workings of colonial-capitalism and empire-building. The question that confronts us today, as scholars who live and work in the postcolonial world of the postcolonial present, is, what can we do to fully appreciate the legacy of Empire in the world today, and can we imagine another mode of international relations that does not follow the iron tracks of the colonial-imperial legacy?

Remembering and *Re-Membering* the Broken Body of a Pan-Asian Globalisation

To attempt to remember the era of Pan-Asian globalisation would entail the need to *re-member*, or to put back together, the broken body of a Pan-Asian world that was divided as a result of colonial encounters. It means having to recognise the fact that, long before there existed such a thing as the nominal construct called 'Southeast Asia', there was a more fluid and porous region that was in constant interaction with other parts of Asia, when the Indian Ocean was not seen as a barrier that divided South and Southeast Asia but rather as a corridor that connected the two parts of the world.

Asia – in the most inclusive and accommodating sense of the word – was never simply *a* place or *a* space that was singular, but rather a multiplicity of overlapping, interconnected spaces and places that were in constant communication and co-dependency with one another. It can also

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[15] See: Kratoska, Paul H., Henk Shulte Nordholt and Remco Raben (eds.), 2005; Pepinsky, Tom. *How Did Southeast Asia Become A Social Fact?* At: Tompepinsky.com, http://tompepinsky.com/2016/02/11/how-did-southeast-asia-become-a-social-fact/ 11 February 2016.

be added that this understanding of Asia includes the European continent as part of one vast landmass, as the Westernmost peninsula of the largest landmass in the world.

The memory of this global order-system was not lost due to a collective amnesia among Asians, or because Asians suffer from acutely bad memory. Its memory was erased in a deliberate and systematic manner by powerful entities – imperial powers, colonial governments, and colonial systems of administration and education – that sought to deny the possibility of there being other alternative world-systems while they busied themselves with the task of building their own imperial networks that tied the various parts of Asia and Africa to the colonial metropoles in the West.

It was upon the foundations of this imperial world order that the present-day postcolonial world was built, and we who live in it today have become the inheritors of the epistemologies, vocabularies and geographies of Empire ourselves. Living as we do in the postcolonial present does *not* mean that we are free from the lingering traces of colonialism and imperialism. It merely means that we inhabit a present that is temporally separated from that past, though that past has not disappeared and it remains with us, still.

By way of a long conclusion, I would like to return to the point raised at the beginning of this paper. The discipline that we know today as international relations is a relatively new one, one that emerged as a result of the tumult of two consecutive world wars and the long night of the Cold War that was of equally global proportions as well. One of the characteristics of the discipline happens to be its relatively ahistorical approach, and the tendency to see the domain of international politics and diplomacy in present-day terms, and, in the course of doing so, commits itself and its practitioners to a kind of 'presentism' where past events and developments are seen and weighed according to the criteria of the present day. Though IR theorists are occasionally wont to quote examples and models such as the 'Thucydides Trap' in their analyses, the utility of

such references – historical though they may appear – lies in their present-day usefulness and relevance to contemporary concerns.

IR theorists have also been inclined to work with the tools at their disposal in the present day, and this includes the political landscape of the world as we know it today. A glance at any map of the world today would point us to the existence of more than two hundred and sixty countries in the world (195 of which are members of the United Nations), as well as a globe that has been divided into regions such as Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and so on.

And yet it has to be recognised that the political landscape of the world as we know it today is the inevitable result of the colonialism and politics of Empire, and that none of the maps we have at our disposal give us a clearer or more complex picture of the close, intimate ties of language, culture and kinship that actually straddle and penetrate the borders of the **maps' seemingly distinct and identifiable** nation-states. In our own part of the world – **which today is referred to as 'Southeast Asia', even though the** term was, and remains, a foreign concept that was imposed on the peoples of our region by outsiders – we can see the lingering traces of these precolonial and premodern linkages and networks today. The common *lingua franca* of maritime Southeast Asia remains Malay, which originated from the Kingdom of Melayu-Jambi in Sumatra and later spread across the region through movement, migration and trade among Asians. We know for a fact that, prior to the arrival of the Western colonial powers, the cultural and economic bonds across the region were far stronger and meaningful than they are today. Andaya (2010), for instance, has written extensively about the close-knit bonds of culture and kinship that once glued Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula closely together, but which were weakened thanks to the division of the Malay world by the British and the Dutch following the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaties of 1814, 1824, and 1870-71.[16] The same can be said about the Java Sea, which was once the maritime bridge between the northern coastal city-states of Java and the

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[16] See: Andaya, 2010.

various kingdoms that dot the southern coastline of Kalimantan. Even today, we can see, in the fibre arts of the courts of Kalimantan, traces of Javanese courtly culture and influence. In mainland Southeast Asia, the various communities of the peoples of Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam continue to exhibit instances of cultural borrowing and overlaps that are shared among them, and Buddhism remains the common religio-cultural glue that binds these communities together.

The division of Southeast Asia into separate colonies plugged into separate Western colonial-imperial networks marked the end of a Pan-Asian globalisation in the most explicit and lasting terms, but what happened to Southeast Asia was by no means unique. In his study of the lasting impact of Western imperialism in Africa, Basil Davidson (1992) came to the same conclusion, noting the manner in which the entire continent of Africa was summarily carved up by the competing empires of Britain, France, Italy, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands.[17] In the course of the so-called 'scramble for Africa', local precolonial understandings of identity and belonging were casually cast aside, as the map of Africa was redrawn not by Africans themselves but by colonial functionaries based in London, Paris, and Brussels. The final result was a series of ruptures even more drastic and traumatic than what took place in Southeast Asia: entire nations were literally torn asunder and communities split into pieces, often accompanied by a systematic and deliberate attempt to pit one ethnic community against another, thus sowing the seeds for the racial-ethnic strife that would blight the continent in the decades to come, such as in Rwanda. Though not all political scientists may agree with Davidson's somewhat raw conclusion that the modern nation-state has been a 'curse' upon Africans, his accounting of the

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[17] Davidson's critique of the postcolonial state in Africa begins from his analysis of the Rwandan conflict in particular, and he argues that the division of the traditional homeland of the Hutus and Tutsi people - that was done by colonial policy makers in Europe with the help of colonial cartographers - effectively set in motion decades of inter-ethnic rivalry between the two groups that would render independent Rwanda unstable in the future. See: Davidson, 1992.

division of Africa and the workings of colonialism in the continent remains pertinent.

History remains as a tool for remembering, and it reminds us that counterfactual possibilities and alternatives did once exist. If there is anything that the history of Asian globalisation can teach us today, it is the idea that identities need not be permanently fixed, static and/or exclusive all the time. As noted earlier, in the work of Chaudhuri (1990), we see how there once existed a wider and more fluid Pan-Asian world where cultures and societies could co-exist on terms that were constantly being re-negotiated by all the parties in question. Again, it is vital for us to remember that this is not, and should not, be seen as an appeal to nostalgia, or a **call for a return to Asian 'authenticity'** – for the simple reason that there was never such a thing in the first place. If anything, **Chaudhuri's work reminds us of the fact that Pan**-Asian globalisation and the emergence of a Pan-Asian network of trade and diplomacy was rendered possible thanks to the fact that Asian communities in the past were not always hooked on the question of purity or authenticity, living as they did at a time when theories of racial differences and hierarchies had not emerged to blight the world.

If any traces of this precolonial Asian globalisation are to be reactivated today, it has to begin with an understanding of how and why the categories and concepts that we have at our disposal now are so limiting and compartmentalising.

We can begin, perhaps, by looking at how we today have been left **with the sweeping and yet divisive nominal constructs of the 'West' and the 'East', and how the use of such nominal constructs traps us in an** oppositional dialectical relationship dating all the way back to the emergence of Europe as an entity that was apart and distinct from the rest of Asia. Over the past half a century, there have been scores of attempts at brokering a better and deeper understanding of the differences between **the 'Western' and 'Eastern' worlds, and yet the tangible results of these** encounters have been meagre and few. The same can be said about the **virtual 'dialogue industry' that emerged in the wake of the terrorist attacks**

on the USA on 11 September 2001, since when dozens if not hundreds of **intercultural dialogues between the 'West' and the 'Muslim world' have** taken place, although the results have proven to be likewise disappointing. The same can also be said of the many other attempts at inter-religious dialogue the world has seen in recent times, be they couched in terms of Muslim-Hindu dialogue, Hindu-Buddhist dialogue, or of the multi-confessional variety. All of these attempts at meaningful communication unfortunately begun from the foundational premise that there exist groups that are distinct and identifiable in the first place, lending the impression of solidity and exceptionalism where there perhaps was none.

Related to this tendency to accept such constructed dichotomies (as part of identity-formation) was the tendency of many (if not all) postcolonial states to accept in a wholesale manner the concept of the singular and distinct nation-state as the only valid model of governance and administration. This is notwithstanding the fact that the postcolonial state was built upon the foundations of the colonial state, that was itself in many respects an institution built not for the benefit of the colonised but the colonisers. Across the world, we can see the enduring legacy of colonial-era laws, vocabularies and logics at work in the daily governance of postcolonial states today, and this also partly accounts for the relative slowness of the development of democratic cultures in so many former colonies (for it has to be remembered that the colonies themselves were never democracies, nor were they governed in a democratic manner). In many parts of the postcolonial world, the Westphalian logic of singular, self-determined states still holds sway, and when we look at the forms of political and diplomatic praxis, we can see how postcolonial elites have embraced this logic in an uncritical manner. (An example of this can be seen in the principle of non-inteference, which is one of the hallmarks of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] and bears many similarities with the same logic of non-interference that emerged following the Peace of Munster and the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.)

Earlier I noted how the emergence of the European world by the 16th and 17th centuries marked a moment of radical departure, when

Europeans began to see themselves as a community of nations and peoples who were different and distinct from the rest of humanity in Asia. This sense of particularity, couched as it was on a gamut of ideas rooted in essentialist understandings of difference and identity, meant that a sense of European exceptionalism was the only logical result of such a rupture. In time, this sense of exceptionalism became coupled with a belief in theories of racial supremacy and racial hierarchies, compelling European leaders and thinkers to place themselves at the centre of the world as well as the forefront of global history. The nett result of this process of collective re-imagining was the emergence of the idea that Europe/the Western World was at the cutting edge of progress and development, and that all other modes of political-economic-religious life were inferior by comparison. (This is despite the fact that other forms of globalisation, such as Arab-Muslim and Buddhist-Asian globalisation, had been in existence long before the spectacular rise of the polities of Western Europe.) If we were to maintain such categories in our analysis of world affairs today, we would merely be repeating the foundational premises and suppositions that under-girded the rise of Empire in the past, and, in so doing, would merely confirm our status as postcolonial subjects who remain living under the long shadow of Empire today.

We should not, of course, throw the baby out of the bathwater. It would be naive to think that the limitations of concepts such as 'nation-states' renders diplomacy and international relations undoable or impractical. Though Basil Davidson was certainly correct in his argument that the modern postcolonial nation-state model was an idea imposed upon Africa and Africans by their former colonial masters, it is highly unlikely that all the states of Africa or Asia would abandon the model of the nation-state in some radical act of intellectual and political liberation.

And yet we can also turn to the past in order to excavate examples and models of alternative modes of diplomacy and international relations that predate the modern era today. Perhaps through that historical recovery, we can also recognise that the modern nation-state is not a thing that comes without its attendant costs. How the states of the world - in

particular the states of present-day Southeast Asia – will deal with the challenges of superpower contestation in the region, rising economic inequity, the climate crisis, and the impact of artificial intelligence on human society, are questions whose answers may not be readily available in textbooks and user manuals.

Living as we do in a globalised world beset with problems and difficulties that are equally global in magnitude, we need to think of new ways to reposition and re-present ourselves on the wider stage of regional and international politics. If, in the past, the polities that dotted the once vibrant and complex landscape of Asia could deal with crisis and change without necessarily adopting the zero-sum logic of 'winner takes all', then perhaps we can learn from our Asian ancestors, who lived in a pre-Westphalian era before national identities became fixed and exclusive, before the prerogatives and needs of the singular state became paramount. History may not come to us with ready-made answers, but the consolation of history is that it reminds us that if things could be different in the past, they can also be different in the future.

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