Chapter 1

Boundaries and Frontiers in Southeast Asia: Fences Have Made Fretful Neighbors

Petra Andělová

Introduction

Southeast Asia is a very complex and diverse region, which precludes the possibility of making broad generalizations regarding its characteristics. Nonetheless, a handful of common features among the eleven states of Southeast Asia can be found. Southeast Asia is quite a mountainous region, with only a “few fertile plains or valleys capable of supporting a dense population” (Solomon 1969, p. 14). The physical geography of the region has thus created a pattern of core areas separated by buffer zones – spaces less favorable for human settlement. The significance of fresh water resources must also be stressed due to the rice-based agriculture predominantly practiced in the region as the main source of human livelihood. These core areas became cradles of future “states”, whilst “uplands” became “frontiers”. As Robert L. Solomon argues, the basic ethnic cleavage is between “lowland” and “hill” peoples – with the latter historically regarded as “wild” and of lesser importance (Solomon 1969, p. 15). Frontiers were often not considered as a part of the “proper state” – although, in the case of precolonial Southeast Asia, it is quite difficult to exactly define the limits of a “proper state”. A proper state’s territory included the capital and its immediate surroundings, but how far that inner space reached depended on many factors which cannot be easily generalized.

Thus, before the arrival of colonial powers, the territory of Southeast Asian “states” had never been officially demarcated, and the concept of precisely delimited boundaries was alien to the region. In some cases “hill” peoples of the frontiers had dual loyalty to two (or more) political centers (such as the Shans of Burma/Myanmar; see Thant 2012, pp. 77–78). The artificial division of Southeast Asian territory among colonial powers and subsequently among succession states (based on the principles of the “Western” model of a state) created “fretful neighbors” and boundary disputes have become one of the key triggers of regional disputes right up to the present day.

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This chapter has two basic goals: Firstly, to summarize the arguments for the main hypothesis that the “Western” concept of exact borders (borderlines)\(^2\) is alien to pre-colonial Southeast Asia and as such has been one of the main sources of disputes among states of the region (and its neighbors); secondly, to define the main areas of border disputes among Southeast Asian states (and their neighbors).

**Definition of Terminology and Theoretical Approach**

Terms such as “boundary”, “territory” or “frontier” are very frequently used in academic research ranging from the fields of archeology to zoology – and political science is no exception. It seems that boundaries are omnipresent, yet different everywhere. The analysis of boundary issues in Southeast Asia in this chapter is grounded in the traditional or classic approach – i.e. in the sense of the state’s significance and as such from the territorial point of view. As such, complex postmodern approaches and conceptualizations of boundaries, territoriality, the construction of socio-spatial identities and the modernity – identity construct will not be reflected in the following analysis.

Few territorial parallels can be drawn to the fading boundaries of Western Europe and North America. The “disappearance of boundaries” is definitely not the case in Southeast Asia. The disappearance of boundaries is an unheard-of concept for most of the world. Moreover, the peacefully shared sovereignty over territory (suzerainty) between two or among several states is an “ideal concept”, which is almost impossible to achieve. But as the East China Sea Peace Initiative proposed by Taiwan in 2012 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MOFA] Taiwan 2012) and subsequent fisheries agreement between Taiwan and Japan (MOFA Taiwan 2013) has shown, sharing (at least some) resources and general usage of a disputed area is possible.\(^3\)

Every event takes place at a certain location. Thus, in order to conduct a comprehensive analysis, it is necessary to take into consideration not only what happened but also where it took place – and in order to define where, we need space that is territorially defined. “Classical” political geography requires a multidisciplinary approach incorporating relevant concepts from the fields

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\(^2\) The term “line” is misleading because borders are in fact two-dimensional planes intersecting Earth’s surface and reaching as low as to the Earth core and as high as roughly to the first orbit.

\(^3\) Even if this agreement excludes territorial waters and the question of sovereignty over disputed islands, it can be considered as a first step towards the territorial dispute peaceful solution.