Southeast Asia as a Regional Concept*
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Just what is the concept of Southeast Asia? How did it emerge? In what directions did it develop? What is its future? The term Southeast Asia has become a standard expression in literature and diplomacy throughout much of the world only since World War II. Yet the regional or collective concept of Southeast Asia is still somewhat amorphous though it is in the process of crystallization. The late Lennox A. Mills in the first chapter of The New World of Southeast Asia published in 1949 called attention to the words of Claudius Caesar after he had been addressing the Roman Senate for three long and dreary hours: “And now, O Claudius Caesar, it is time you told the senators what on earth you have been talking about.”

In this article the author will briefly trace the origins of the term and then concentrate on explaining the complex evolution of the regional or collective concept of Southeast Asia. The latter effort involves the identification and analysis of major developments contributing to the concept. In his conclusion he will assert that the validity of the concept of Southeast Asia rests largely on past and present political perceptions of the area as a region. At the same time he will not downgrade the support for the concept that has come from those individuals of the academic community who have stressed in their disciplines the common rather than the diverse aspects of Southeast Asia. The value of the regional concept will be assessed from the perspective of the foregoing evidence.

Origins

The term Southeast Asia or a variation of it was used in scholarly literature, particularly geography and anthropology, for some time before the outbreak of World War II in 1939. The usage of the term arose from convenience — the need to name a geographical entity on the map or what could be argued as constituting a geographical entity. Southeast Asia at the time did not denote the regional or collective concept increasingly associated with it after World War II. In 1951 Victor Purcell pointedly criticized the term Southeast Asia as “cumbersome, inaccurate, and indefinite in its scope” and offered for consideration in its place Indosinesia.

In classical and post-classical Southeast Asia prior to early European involve-
ment, if the historical periodization of Harry J. Benda is followed, the elite in the area or neighbouring world perceived the territory in terms of a general sense of direction or location and in the light of various concepts of space and statecraft. There were many pre-colonial contacts — travel and communications, even the gathering of political intelligence — but no regionalism existed.

Although the Southeast Asians themselves had no common name for the region the early Indian navigators and merchants, followed in numbers by Chinese and later Japanese mariners and traders, coined their own terminology. Notable among the Indian terms was the loose term Suvarnadvipa or “land of gold”. The Chinese and the Japanese (the latter borrowing from the former) used respectively the expressions Nanyang and Nanyo, both translated as “southern seas”, to indicate rather vaguely or nebulously their sense of direction or location. It should be stressed that these expressions reflected the roles of the sea-minded people who used them and focused on seas with their adjacent lands rather than on lands with their adjacent seas. (Tung-nan Ya, a direct Chinese translation of Southeast Asia, is more accurate.)

February 1839 was the noteworthy date the Reverend Howard Malcom of Boston gave the preface of his Travels in South-Eastern Asia, the full title of which revealed his geographical scope. Amazingly he has a map of “South Eastern Asia” that in terms of the currently accepted definition of the region resembles the extent of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten’s original Southeast Asia Command of 1943 (as far as Southeast Asia is concerned), the biggest exception being Indonesia. Malcom’s “Farther India” was defined as “India beyond the Ganges”, embracing “Burmah, Asam, Munnipore, Siam, Camboja, and Cochin-China; or, to speak more comprehensively, all the region between China and the Bay of Bengal, southward of the Thibet Mountains”.

It is not possible to identify beyond any question the first person who used the expression Southeast Asia or a variation of it. It might just have been an American, the Reverend Howard Malcom! But there can be no doubt that the Europeans used the term much more extensively before it was widely employed in the United States.

**Effects of World War II**

In the course of World War II (1939-45) Southeast Asia became a fixed and practical term even in the United States. Moreover, the region was more and more perceived in collective dimensions having military, political, and other aspects. At the same time this perception should not be exaggerated, for subsequent developments would markedly sharpen it.

The Institute of Pacific Relations founded in Honolulu in 1925 played a significant role in the evolution of the concept of Southeast Asia before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, not to mention the establishment of Mountbatten’s South East Asia Command in August 1943. Prior to the American entrance in World War II, the Institute undertook a number of studies on the social, economic, and political problems of Southeast Asia. In 1940 William L. Holland arranged the series of research reports, and in 1941 and 1942 all of them used “Southeast Asia” in their titles.