

Global History: Continental and Maritime *

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Abstract

World history today has been greatly influenced by the fact that it was the revolution in naval power during the past two centuries that made the world truly global. This has led to a new master narrative that re-framed five millennia of recorded history in order to explain the ultimate triumph of the maritime economies. The result of such revision is to underestimate and distort the role of continental Eurasia in the shaping of the three key civilizations that developed independently and remain distinct: the Mediterranean, the Indic and the Sinic. Only by a fuller reappraisal of the linkages of trade and war dominated by the Eurasian central forces for most of history can we understand the global pressures perennially at work. By setting the continental and the maritime in their total historical context and recognizing their importance today, we can better explain what is happening and what is likely to continue to influence the course of world history.

* This is based on the keynote lecture given on May 2015 at the 3rd Congress of the Asian Association of World Historians at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. My approach to world history comes from the study of Chinese, Indian and Arab experiences with maritime trade through the ages and the spread of Chinese and Indian global communities. In modern times, the focus is on the globalizing transformations produced by European navies in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This led me to look closer at the break between millennia of recorded history and the last three centuries of economic revolutions. The perspectives were first outlined in Ooi Kee Beng, *The Eurasian Core and its Edges: Dialogues with Wang Gungwu on the history of the world*, published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies early in 2015.

Keywords

Indo-European, Turko-Mongol, Mediterranean, Indic, Sinic civilization, continental, maritime global

My interest in world history was aroused by the impact of the West on East and Southeast Asia. Various efforts at writing world history employ different approaches and assumptions and even offer different “master narratives.” Those written in the 20th century, from Spengler and Toynbee to McNeill and by the stalwarts of the World History Association have aroused wide interest and the responses to them from historians all over the world reveal how people understand their political and economic conditions in different ways. In particular, the origins of distinctive civilizations raise fundamental questions about how world history should be written.

My interests led me to focus on how human beings adapted to living on highlands, steppes and deserts, on fertile land, and by rivers and oceans, to produce the power systems that best suited the geopolitical conditions encountered. This essay therefore deals with the relationships underlying the rise of ancient civilizations and the polities interacting with one another in the context of their different backgrounds. In particular, how riverine states and civilizations were shaped by threats and dangers that came from their continental rivals and enemies; how some coastal and maritime states turned to naval power enabling them to transform the world in modern times; and how continental peoples, especially those of Eurasia, played major roles in connecting civilizations and, despite frequent times of instability and disruption, why their role remains a major factor in historical development.

The competition for wealth and power between settled civilizations and nomadic confederations that produced most of recorded history occurred in the Afro-Eurasian landmass and its surrounding waters. It enables us to construct a continuous story for at least the past 5,000 years. Approaching world history through the sets of relationships thus created helps us to understand the forces that unite the world as well as those that still divide it. For example, in recent centuries, maritime interconnec-

tivity of distant lands reached by sea and across oceans has bonded peoples as never before. The naval power that made this possible also produced superpowers like the British empire during the 19th century. This has now been transmitted to an even more powerful superpower, the United States. Its naval power is so dominant that no other country is able to challenge it even in waters just off its own coasts. This dominance has led us to neglect the thousands of years of history when it was the Eurasian landmass that determined the course of human history. That neglect is unjustified. Four-fifths of the world's population live and work on the Afro-Eurasian continent. Their potential has been unlocked by the spur of globalization and their peoples are reaching for a new stage of development. In that context, much of our pre-modern human history would need to be re-examined to see how the millennia of human experience before the 18th century can still play a vital part in the world's future.

I. THREE GREAT CIVILIZATIONS

During the 5,000 years of recorded history, three separate civilizations emerged from riverine conditions enabling great wealth to be generated from their agrarian-urban foundations. The powerful imperial riverine states that emerged on the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates rivers interacted with the coastal city-states of the Eastern Mediterranean to produce one of those civilizations, the Mediterranean. Powerful riverine states also arose from the Indus and the Ganges rivers on the Indian subcontinent to produce the Indic civilization. And, from the Huanghe and the Yangzi rivers, the new civilization eventually spread eastwards and southwards to become the Sinic civilization. All three underwent further changes to embrace new peoples drawn into their respective orbits and to encompass the new needs that emerged.

All three were thereby enriched and strengthened, but they also shared a common experience. From their very beginnings, they were subject to frequent attacks, sometimes devastating, from warring nomadic tribes coming out of the Eurasian heart-

land. Every now and then, one or other of the three civilizations was conquered by invaders. All three were forced to concentrate resources to defend themselves against such attacks. In the course of doing that over tens of centuries, each of them also continued to grow in power and prosperity by having to respond and overcome continuous external threats. There were times of relative peace but, even while they fostered vital commercial links connecting the three, they were often overshadowed by overland warfare. Nevertheless, as each civilization fought to protect itself, it was inevitably shaped by continuous efforts to respond to existential challenges.

1. The Indic Civilization

This began in the middle reaches of two great river systems, the Indus and the Ganges. Fertile lands by those waters produced the surpluses and technologies that made large-scale settlements possible. But nomadic peoples of the desert and highlands to the west and northwest, whose lives in their oases and deep valleys were under pressure from highly mobile peoples further north, continually threatened to bear down on the plains. Their common enemies were peoples who had too much land and too little water to build large settlements of their own, and who thrived on warfare and control of intercontinental trade. When most constructive, these warriors played historic roles in connecting across vast distances the agrarian-urban peoples who established their respective civilizations.

The mix of the Indus-Ganges and Dravidian cultures produced this distinctive Indic civilization. Directly north and northeastwards, it was well protected from northern warring tribes because the Himalayas provided an invaluable shield. But there were narrow gateways through which its historic enemies regularly came, the valleys close to the Khyber Pass. The rulers of the earliest polities of the riverine civilization on the Indus and the Ganges had to face endlessly continental invaders from the Eurasian core. At the same time, that also opened the civilization to interactions with protagonists of other civilizations, Persians and Greeks as bearers of the Mediterranean civilization.

Ultimately, several waves of continental invaders, ranging from Turco-Afghans to the Mughals (Mongol-Turks) impacted most on Indic institutions of trade, war and governance.

During the millennia of interactions, the Indic civilization also left its mark across the Himalayas. Some of the invaders, enlightened by their contacts with its ideas and values, in turn transmitted much of Indic religion, music and the arts via Eurasia to the Mediterranean and to East Asia. Invading routes also kept open trading links that connected the Mediterranean, via the Silk Roads, with the eastern ends of Eurasia. In addition, the Indic civilization looked seawards and attracted sailors and traders from the lands of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, and also transmitted many of its institutions across the eastern coasts of the Indian Ocean to the far ends of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago and the coasts of Eastern Asia.

Significantly, in neither direction in the Indian Ocean was there any serious conflict or mutual threat. On the contrary, so attractive was this civilization that its ideals and artifacts spread beyond Sri Lanka across the Bay of Bengal and had deep impact on both mainland and archipelagic Southeast Asia. Thus the vast openness of the Indian Ocean, with the lack of any threats by sea, made it unnecessary for any polity to develop naval power. The capacity to build large navies, as with the Chola empire of South India, was sooner or later set aside. As a result, the wealth of Indic civilization was transmitted peacefully. What was more, that set the pattern of later civilizational influences: for example, the Islamic faith was carried with negligible resort to force by Arab, Persian as well as South Indian maritime traders to the islands of Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and beyond.

In short, the Indic polities that developed along the coasts of the Indian Ocean had no maritime enemies and their activities at sea were largely focused on peaceful fishing and trade. This was in sharp contrast to the polities in the north that remained vulnerable to the invading armies from beyond the Khyber Pass. Resources thus constantly had to be devoted to protecting the northwest frontier lands from unending continental threats. This forced the civilization to be constantly defensive

overland while it remained open and welcoming to maritime visitations.

2. The Sinic Civilization

This civilization began among the peoples of the valleys of two great river systems, the Huanghe and the Yangzi. The conditions along the Huanghe gave rise to rulers who, with centralized bureaucratic states established after continuous warfare, spread their ideas and methods southwards and eastwards reaching to the coastal lands from the Korean peninsula to the borders of Southeast Asia by the first millennium CE. Parts of this civilization then peacefully crossed the seas to Japan. By that time, the peoples across the South China Sea had been deeply influenced by the Indic civilization. In fact, Buddhist ideals and practices in particular were transmitted overland to East Asia through Central Asia and also travelled overseas across the Bay of Bengal via Southeast Asia to the China coasts.

It is interesting to note that the semi-Mediterranean conditions of the South China Sea did not produce a civilization that could be compared to that which emerged in the Mediterranean Sea. There was little need for naval warfare when there were no contending empires fighting for dominance across its waters. The various dynastic rulers of China did become powerful but none of these rulers ever felt challenged by enemies coming from the sea. Therefore, they could concentrate on building great defensive power overland where they were clearly alert to ever-present continental threats. As a result, the Sinic civilization was content to defend its coastal economy but not develop naval forces beyond what was necessary along its shores.

China did nevertheless have considerable naval capacity by the 10th century and this naval power was further built up during the Song dynasty, interestingly largely to supplement its defense against northern threats from continental enemies like the Jurchen empire and, after its fall, the Mongol conquerors of that empire. This power, in the hands of the Mongol Yuan empire, was demonstrated in East and Southeast Asia in the 13th century when Khubilai Khan used it to attack Japan, Vietnam and

Champa, and later Java. The fleets to Vietnam and Champa failed and the attack on Java achieved nothing. As for the fleet sent to Japan, it was driven off. By the early 15th century, Ming China's navy had become the largest navy in the world. Emperor Yongle could send the seven expeditions of Admiral Zheng He out to the Indian Ocean and the coast of East Africa. When all of them confirmed for the Ming rulers that there were no enemies to be found across the waters, the expeditions were deemed costly and unnecessary. The idea of an offshore navy was discredited after 1435 and the ships were destroyed or left to disintegrate. Attention thereafter was focused on continental dangers and huge imperial resources were dedicated to building the Great Wall to keep the dynasty's enemies at bay.

The Manchus from the northeast then conquered Ming China. The Qing emperors led one of the most powerful continental confederations of tribes from outside the Great Wall. After 1684, when they subdued the Ming loyalists who had established themselves on the island of Taiwan, they totally neglected naval power. They drew the empire more towards the Eurasian heartland and went further to move from what had long been a defensive position to an increasingly aggressive one in Central and Northern Asia. Together with Russian continental advances from the west into that same region, they subdued the Mongol efforts to revive their empires as well as several Turkic-Muslim states and thus further enhanced the modern militarization of the Eurasian heartland. Significantly, this happened at the time a new kind of global maritime power had arisen to control the three great oceans to encircle the land formations of the world, the European sea-borne empires. The historic climax was reached when the British empire in India met the Russian and Manchu Qing empires in the steppes and highlands of Turkestan (now mainly in Xinjiang) and Tibet.

3. The Mediterranean Civilization

This was the civilization that ultimately created the maritime counterpoise to continental power. It first arose out of the riverine empires of Sumer-Mesopotamia and Egypt and grew after it

encountered the smaller polities of the Aegean Sea. This civilization was quite different from the other two because it developed around a large inland sea. Its riverine empires competed with polities whose peoples had less cultivable land along the Mediterranean coasts. These coastal peoples of Greece and the Levant built small polities that depended on maritime trade and on colonies across the sea supported by their naval skills. Thus the civilization that emerged, unlike the other two, was not primarily continental. Instead, close attention was paid to naval power from the very earliest times, dramatically captured by the decisive struggles that enabled the coastal Greeks to defeat the continental Persians at sea. Thus for millennia, from the Semitic Phoenicians and the Indo-European Greeks and their colonies to the Roman and Hellenistic empires, the importance of naval power was widely understood.

The Mediterranean's mixed heritage of the riverine-continental and coastal-maritime was unique. Nevertheless, that did not exempt its various polities from the threat of continental enemies reaching from afar, especially those led by the tribal confederations of the Eurasian heartland. While the civilization was evolving, nomadic tribes from the forests attacked it from continental Europe while others came out of the deserts and steppes of Central Asia and the marginal lands in between. The attacks led to powerful responses, strengthening the defensive and offensive capabilities of older Mediterranean empires. At the same time, they also forced the city-states to defend their heritage by building new overarching empires themselves. The common experience by both kinds of empires encouraged the interaction of diverse ideas and institutions and the rapid advancement of military technologies.

For example, a serious divide emerged between coastal city-states whose several civic gods allowed their people to be worldly and value rationality, and those tribes of the Eastern Mediterranean whose faith in one supreme God led them to seek divine help to limit the power of their rulers. But whether it was one god or many, both groups also had to defend themselves from enemies who came out of the Eurasian continental heartland. Ultimately, the Germanic and Slavic peoples who came from the

north came to adopt by and large the Mediterranean civilization they encountered. Whereas other Indo-European peoples, together with the northern and central Asian ancestors of the nomadic Turkic peoples, pushed west towards the Mediterranean to challenge that civilization and sought to reshape it.

The most dramatic display of this continuous struggle can be seen in the unexpected invasion by the nearest nomadic forces, Semitic peoples from the deserts beyond the Levant long familiar with and inspired by the Mediterranean civilization. This was the seventh-century explosive force that came from desert Arab warriors whose reinterpretation of the monotheism of the Jews and Christians led to a revolt overwhelming the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. They reached westwards across North Africa to the far end of that inland sea, crossing to the northern shores at both ends and driven out of the Iberian peninsula only after several centuries of political control.

Even more significantly, by the 8th century, these nomadic Arabs pushed northeastwards into continental Eurasia and converted a large part of the peoples there. Their Islamic faith went on to transform the lives of continental tribes and became the driving force of several of the powerful empires that came to dominate the world for almost ten centuries. Perhaps the most remarkable of Islam's success was in drawing the bulk of the Turkic peoples away from the world-conquering Mongols who remained Buddhist in their faith, and thus also away from the Sinic civilization. The descendants of these Turks then led the Islamic world to threaten the civilizations of both the Indian sub-continent and the Euro-Mediterranean.

II. THE EURASIAN CORE

This refers to the continental heartland whose peoples were for millennia drawn to the wealth and power of the three ancient civilizations. Their interactions with the settled urban peoples also drew their traders into the continental orbit and enabled them to know other civilizations. The central role of these core lands and peoples was to influence the civilizing processes of all

three. The Eurasian core provided home to highly mobile and enterprising forces that kept the three civilizations in touch as well as apart. Its nomadic economies were enriched by trade but also by forays, invasions and conquests of the prosperous agrarian states they came in contact with. Hundreds of tribal units from different parts of the continent shared the advantages of multi-directional aggressions. They ranged widely in their willingness and ability to learn from the riverine civilizations vulnerable to their attacks. The Germanic tribes of northern and central Europe that moved south to the Mediterranean were largely influenced by Mediterranean civilization while also providing a channel for its values to be brought home to those who remained on the coasts of the North and Baltic seas. The Slavic tribes pushed in another direction, to the edges of the steppes, but were constantly in danger of attacks from the Eurasian core, some responding by establishing powerful continental powers of their own.

This was also true of other Indo-European speaking tribes that moved eastwards towards the areas bordering the Indic and Sinic civilizations, notably those that first entered the Indian sub-continent in ancient times. Then there were the Iranian peoples in Central Asia (including Scythians and Sogdians), who connected with the Xiongnu and Hun tribes that then pushed back towards Europe; and others who melded with the Turko-Mongol speaking peoples coming westwards from the Mongolian steppes. The powerful mixtures of peoples that controlled the oases across the Eurasian heartland also facilitated trade routes for cultural and technological exchange between civilizations on its edges. Those who were Buddhists, Jews and Christians lost out in the end to Muslim Turks. Together with the Iranians, these Turkic peoples had considerable impact on Mediterranean civilization, and also brought Mediterranean civilization into Central Asia. Similarly, on the eastern side, various Mongol tribes and their eastern neighbours like the Tungusic-speaking Jurchen-Manchu, had great impact on the political culture of the Han Chinese bearers of Sinic civilization between the 12th and 19th centuries. The majority of the Manchu, however, have be-

come Sinicized, now registered as the Man minority in the People's Republic of China.

The peoples of the Eurasian core have never been seen as having a civilization of their own. Records showed that they were content to learn from settled peoples and adopt what they thought useful, including religion, literature, the arts and productive technologies. For millennia, they moved in various directions and, when battles were over, most returned home to the steppes. But, when pressured by fiercer nomadic neighbours, or when attracted by the gold and splendor of civilized states, nomadic tribes would re-gather into new confederations to launch further attacks. After that, some did decide to settle down and become part of the civilizations that they had admired from afar.

In contrast, those on the edges of the landmass included other risk-takers who were nomadic in their own ways and traded by sea along the coasts of the Indian Ocean between the Persian Gulf and the South China and Java Seas. They too contributed to the diffusion of goods and ideas among all peoples who had access to the sea. But records show that the mastery of maritime transport was more difficult and dangerous than the cavalry-based control of continental caravan routes. Training horses and camels was easier than building ships that could safely sail the oceans. In addition, the oceans did not have the resources needed for sustaining political power comparable with those available on land. Thus, for thousands of years, the three ancient civilizations were content to be enriched by the peaceful use of the oceans while accepting that there was no alternative to fighting continuously with continental enemies in order to protect what they had created. It was not until the past three centuries that new conditions and technologies enabled the building of new kinds of maritime power. Since the 18th century, they have been successfully used to counter what had been perpetual threats from the continent. How did this new power come about?

III. THE MEDITERRANEAN BREAKOUT

The turning point came during the 15th century, especially after the fall of Constantinople, when European kingdoms on the northern shores of the Mediterranean became increasingly dependent on Muslim rulers who had cut them off from direct access to the riches of India and China. Ever since Muslim Arabs expanded across North Africa to the Iberian peninsula and into Persia and Central Asia deep into the Eurasian core, the Mediterranean was divided into two. The Christian northern half launched crusade after crusade to try and retake the holy city of Jerusalem. Failure ensured their merchants being often left out from trade with Asia during hostilities. There was a century of relief when the Mongol Empire allowed trade to flow and Europeans (for example, via the Book of Marco Polo) learnt more about the wondrous riches on the other side of Eurasia. That not only inspired the idea of actively seeking other routes to bypass enemy states but also to link up with non-Muslim allies against Muslim polities that controlled monopolies on goods.

There were many technological and intellectual changes that were transforming Europe after the 13th century, but the focus here is on the maritime adventures spurred by the troubled politics of the Mediterranean. The 15th century saw the final push by Christian rulers in driving the Muslim kingdoms out of the Iberian peninsula. Under Prince Henry the Navigator, the Portuguese reached across to the Atlantic coast of Africa. The Spanish monarch, after success against the last of the Muslim states in Granada, was now free to concentrate on the Atlantic. The historic voyages of Christopher Columbus followed and a new maritime world was born that made the Atlantic Ocean a second Mediterranean for the Iberian kingdoms and then several other Western European powers, notably the Dutch and the English.

Portuguese and Spanish armed shipping set out for spices and gold as well as for Christian allies and new converts, crossing the Atlantic into the Indian Ocean and, soon after, across the Pacific. Their first steps in linking the three oceans marked only the beginning. Two centuries of exploration followed with armed

trading ships backed by official naval power. By the 18th century, maritime globalization of the world connected all economies. The completion of this remarkable process highlights a central part of world history, the relationship between the continental and the maritime and the fact that the maritime was what made the global possible. This enabled economies that were made interdependent by capitalism and the industrial revolution to be locked in place by the seas. The struggle for naval supremacy also began, with the British becoming masters of the world's navies by the end of the 18th century and the Americans inheriting that position during the 20th century.

This power has controlled and connected the oceans in new ways. Among the many remarkable developments it generated of growing interest in the 20th century, two are particularly significant. The first happened on the American continent. North America, especially the revolutionary United States, rejected the politics of the Old World of religious wars and nation-states and chose to build an inclusive new country based on principles of liberty and equality. Central and South American states also accepted some of the same principles during their struggle for independence but Latin America chose to reproduce the old model of nation-states. Consequently, these states have not been as innovative as the United States where an exceptional vision dominated and, after 240 years, still prevails. The imaginative founding leaders of the United States wanted a totally fresh start in their New World, one that would eventually draw its peoples from all over the world, peoples ready to discard their pasts and build new futures based on the country's distinctive principles. In the end, this enabled the country to develop into a power that was both continental and maritime and strong enough to dominate the rest of the world.

The other development was in the two oceans, the Indian and Pacific. By the 20th century, following the decolonization of European empires at the end of the Second World War and the emergence of new nation-states in the region between the two oceans, the two became effectively one, now the Indo-Pacific. More recently, with the economic uplift experienced in both East and South Asia and the shifting of the world's centre eastwards,

there is a new perspective of the archipelagic region of Southeast Asia. Situated between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans and serving as a pivot between powers like Japan and China on one side and India and the oil-rich Middle East world on the other, it is poised to play a new role in history.

Of particular relevance is the fact that this region of Southeast Asia was the home of most maritime peoples in human history, the ancient Austronesian-speaking peoples who came out of the East Asian mainland and crossed the two oceans long before anybody else. These people had been maritime without developing a land-based powerful state or great empires having navies that fought wars with the great continental powers of the Sinic, Indic or Mediterranean civilizations. On the contrary, they interacted with each over millennia and adopted those cultural artifacts that attracted them in order to enrich their lives. They never had to endure threats from continental forces that forced the neighbouring Sinic and Indic civilizations to be constantly defensive against powerful enemies from their north.

The first real threat that these seagoing peoples faced came when armed European traders and adventurers brought aggressive naval forces out of the Mediterranean to their shores. However, that also gave them eventually the exceptional place the region now has in global history. The end of the European empires left a set of new nations with a fresh understanding of maritime power. This now gives the region an exceptional role at the centre of an Indo-Pacific strategic system in which Old World continental power meets New World maritime power in a new configuration in world affairs.

1. Naval Power of Continental United States

When reminded that 90% of our 5,000 years of recorded history has to do with the Afro-Eurasian landmass, we are not surprised by the impact of the discovery of a new landmass across the Atlantic on world affairs. However, what is no less important but less appreciated in modern historical studies is the part this new continent has played during the past three centuries in bridging the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Given what we know today, it is logical to treat the New World as an integral part of human evolution and development. Fresh perspectives from North America do in fact acknowledge that its history is rooted in the Euro-Mediterranean civilization. Thus they are right to draw on Eurocentric histories for their ancient past and revise them to account for the power shift to the North American continent. From their point of view, five millennia of recorded history were centered on the civilization that evolved around the Mediterranean. It was the genius of the peoples who fought for control of that inland sea that ultimately created the conditions making the modern world possible. Thereafter, the Afro-Eurasian landmass was overshadowed by the new globalized economies that developed through control of the oceans: the Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific.

This modern perspective of progressive changes has led us to neglect the importance of the Eurasian core in recorded history. The fact that maritime trade and naval power fundamentally changed the balance of world history during the last century has led to a misreading of the relationship between maritime and continental power. We need to revisit the central role of the peoples of the Eurasian interiors and their long-term influences on the three ancient but modernizing civilizations on the edges of the landmass in order to have a more balanced understanding of the future of world history.

One can look afresh at the lands "beyond the edges" of Afro-Eurasia now that the Mediterranean breakout has laid the foundations for global dominance by the world's strongest naval power. The current American Navy has learnt lessons from centuries of British naval experience. It has also learnt from Britain's island protégé, the Japanese navy that surprised the world by defeating the navies of both China and Tsarist Russia. Both in the end reached limits that were set because neither had continental power in the background. The striking fact is that the new naval power of the United States is different because it is supported by its own continental power. In addition, unlike the three earlier civilizations, it has no overland enemies. This exceptional position of the United States was assured by the end of the 19th century and it has enabled it to be the superpower that it now is.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to ignore the latent power of 5,000 years of Afro-Eurasian history. It cannot be assumed that this exceptional development will replace the old history that still engages the bulk of the world's population. It cannot be expected to transform those peoples whose heritages tie them strongly to past millennia, peoples who still believe in the achievements of their ancestors whether continental or maritime.

2. Eurasia's Furthest Edge: Southeast Asia in the Indo-Pacific

The region now called Southeast Asia did not have a common identity. At best, it had some "semi-Mediterranean" tropical characteristics, and could even be seen as autonomous extensions of two civilizations, the Indic and the Sinic. In between the two, the region had served largely as a string of transit stops in the historical record. On one side was the archipelagic world known to many as Nusantara, one that shared a distinctive nomadic seafaring lifestyle for millennia. This world was, over time, influenced by cultures that came by sea from the coastal trading communities of the Indian Ocean and, from those contacts, local polities evolved along the Straits of Malacca and the Java Sea.

On the other side were riverine states built by the Mon-Khmer speaking peoples under the influence of the two adjacent civilizations, the Indic coming by sea from the west and the Sinic extending overland from the north. The riverine states of the Red River, the Mekong, Menam, Irrawaddy and the Salween were all subjected to continental pressures for the past two millennia. This was when peoples from the Tibetan and adjacent highlands and those of southern China pressed southwards to establish the Burman state in the west and the current Thailand and states in the east. The Sinic-influenced Vietnamese who spoke a Mon-Khmer language also pushed south and, like others established there, remained continental in orientation. Until recently, it did not seem necessary to share the maritime interests of their archipelagic neighbours. There were exceptions. When the ancient Chams, an Austronesian-speaking people, came on land and occupied the coastal areas of what is now Central and

Southern Vietnam, they found that it was not enough to have the powerful fleets that they depended on for trade and control of the seas. In the end, the lack of secure continental power was fatal and the kingdom finally fell to the continental power of the Vietnamese.

Following the globalization of the past two centuries, a new role is now possible for this Southeast Asian region in the Indo-Pacific as the geopolitical fulcrum between continental and maritime power. Its new self-awareness is the post-colonial product of the Anglo-American naval world during the Cold War. The region became unexpectedly central when that ideological struggle emerged also as one between the Sino-Soviet continental bloc and the maritime alliances led by the United States. The significance of Southeast Asia's location is even clearer now that the continental states with no easy access to the sea realize their disadvantage when maritime transportation is the key to economic development in the modern global economy.

During the past two decades, this has been confirmed by China's spectacular success in economic growth, one that has led to a keen awareness of the need for naval power to protect its interests. India, another power long engaged in fending off continental threats, is also following suit. The Southeast Asian region in between has thus become strategically significant. In particular, there is now keen competition between naval powers that wish to preserve their dominance at sea and continental powers that have newly discovered how vital maritime security is to ensure their economic development. Hence, there is now the phenomenon of widely shared and intense interest in the potential unity of Southeast Asia as an independent region. Of particular concern is the possibility of an economic community of shared values in which all member states work together as a region both maritime and continental, one able to understand and satisfy the needs of neighbouring rival powers.

World history obviously will not be confined to any single narrative. What is necessary is that we review that history regularly in part to accommodate new data and interpretations that correct erroneous views, but also in part as response to new developments that the world faces. In that context, a balanced view

of world history is essential, not Eurocentric or Asiatic or any other-centric. Eurasia is given more attention here because the Anglo-American maritime perspective dominant today has led to its neglect. There is no doubt that the maritime is as important as it deserves to be. It is the main reason why global economies are so well connected. But the naval power that has tempted countries like Britain, Japan and now the US to use it to dominate global affairs tends to set aside millennia of recorded history and leaves the impression that the pre-modern past is barely relevant. This is unjustified. We need to critically examine any world history that overstates the role of maritime affairs just as we have modified the old histories that gave continental history too much space for too long.