

Southeast Asia: An Introduction

The name is new but the heartland that it refers to was already celebrated in eras primeval. Ancient Chinese and Indians as well as the ancient Arabs, Greeks and Romans had a fairly clear idea of Southeast Asia, the mass of land and islands west of India and south of China. To the ancient Chinese, it was Nan Yang ; to their Indian contemporaries, it was Savarnadvipa; and to the Arabs of antiquity, it was Qumr. To these ancients, Southeast Asia was the alternative passage of traders to the vast China market, an archipelagic highway that flourished each time the caravans of the “silk route” could not get through the passes of Central Asia. During the long night when most of it was under colonial rule, the European powers, of course, called it “India Orientalis,” East India.

The term “Southeast Asia” is of recent vintage. German writers of the late 19th century occasionally used the term. It gained some currency when the British during the second world war created Lord Louis Mountbatten’s Southeast Asia Military Command which included Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. It became more or less a household term when the Cold War was already raging in earnest in the mid-50s and the West was impelled by regional events to create a military alliance called the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

Today the term Southeast Asia refers to that mass of land and archipelagos that are covered by the states of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Stretching across three time zones which makes it about as wide as Europe, Southeast Asia shares the monsoon climate with India. Except for a small part of Myanmar, all the countries within this region are between the tropics. Before the advent of Indian and Chinese cultural influences in the region, it definitely had an indigenous culture which was neither homogenous nor evenly spread but nevertheless bore many common characteristics, being part of a vast network of animist cultures that also took into its fold the Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian cousins of the Southeast Asians. Southeast Asian mythology was cosmologically oriented and social organization was a product of the monsoon climate and an irrigated system of agriculture. The Southeast Asians were great seafarers and, powered by the monsoon winds, they regularly reached Madagascar, the Middle East and the eastern coasts of Africa in their voyages of trade.

The peoples who came in contact with them brought various cultural influences into Southeast Asia, including the great universalistic religions that are widespread today in the region. Thus, Malaysia, Indonesia (except Bali which is Hindu), Brunei and the southernmost parts of the Philippines are a realm of Sunni Islam; Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia adhere to Theravada Buddhism; while Mahayana Buddhism prevails among many in Vietnam. The Philippines, except for its southern part which is predominantly Muslim, is a bastion of Roman Catholicism. Underneath all the layers of religion and cultural influences, a common Southeast Asian culture survives to this day, unobtrusive but real.

The Southeast Asians speak some 1,000 languages, classified by scholars into Sinitic, which are the languages of the Chinese communities of the region, Tibeto-Burman, Karen, Miao-Yao, Tai which includes the national languages of Thailand and Laos, Malayo-Polynesian which is easily the largest and most widely-distributed group as it ranges from Madagascar to the South Pacific,

Mon-Khmer, Viet-Muong and Papuan which is limited to eastern Indonesia. The colonial languages have persisted in the region: French is still spoken in the mainland Southeast Asia but is losing ground. Many Indonesians still speak Dutch. Spanish is no longer spoken in the Philippines but a large Spanish vocabulary has been embedded in the various Philippine languages. Portuguese is still spoken in East Timor. English is fast gaining popularity all over Southeast Asia.

Economically, Southeast Asia belongs to the developing world, even if some of the countries within it have been hailed as among the most dynamic economies in the world today. Four of the 10 Southeast Asian countries have joined the world's top 20 most competitive economies.

This region produces nearly all of the world's supply of abaca, more than 85 percent of its natural rubber, some 85 percent of its palm oil and more than 70 percent of its tin. Just two of the countries within it, the Philippines and Indonesia, account for well over two thirds of the world's supply of copra. Three of the countries within it—Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia and Malaysia—are petroleum producers. It has also huge deposits of gold, copper and other economically important minerals. It is a major exporter of textiles, garments, electronics, sugar and tropical fruits. A major source of the world's timber supply, it boasts some of the few remaining tropical forests, the lungs of the world. The immense combined marine territories of the countries, already rich with catch fishery and other marine resources, are being diligently explored for petroleum and natural gas deposits. Its population of about 500 million constitutes a huge market with a steadily increasing purchasing power. One of every ten persons in the world today is a Southeast Asian.

Apart from its obvious economic importance and the fabulous mineral wealth that its marine territories are supposed to hold, Southeast Asia is also of global strategic importance. It is the bridge between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and controls vital sea-lanes that give China, Japan and the US Pacific Coast access to the Middle East and the eastern coasts of Africa. The oil tankers and freighters that pass daily without fail through these sea-lanes, to a significant extent, buttress Japan's status as an industrial power.

Conscious of its economic achievements, its successes in community-building, and its strategic importance to global security, Southeast Asia today assumes its role in world affairs with confidence and a great deal of hope. As such, it richly deserves the appellation that some scholars have given it: "the heartland of our times."

Reference: https://asean.org/?static_post=southeast-asia-heartland-of-our-times