

hindustantimes**Kishore Mahbubani**
May 21, 2008First Published: 22:51 IST(21/5/2008)
Last Updated: 22:59 IST(21/5/2008)

South by south text

Small meetings can produce big ideas. This happened recently at the first India-Singapore Strategic Dialogue held in Singapore between May 5-6, 2008. One big idea that surfaced was the recognition that the time has come to re-establish the natural historical integration and synergy between India and Southeast Asia.

Two adverse geo-political developments interrupted this natural connection. The first was European colonial expansion. After India was totally colonised by the British for well over a century, Indian minds naturally looked to London as the centre of their mental universe. The second was the Cold War, which surfaced around the time India gained Independence. When the geo-political deck of cards were dealt in the Cold War, India and Southeast Asia found themselves in different camps. As a result of the close American alliance with both China and Pakistan, India found geo-political comfort in moving closer to the Soviet Union. Over in Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) emerged as a pro-American gathering to initially counter-balance China and later North Vietnam.

These adverse geopolitical developments have come to an end; Asean has now embraced Vietnam and also developed close ties with China. Simultaneously, the end of the era of Western domination of world history has begun to peel away the last lingering layers of Western cultural and political influence from Asian minds. Fewer Indian minds, for example, look at London as the centre of their universe. As this process of de-Westernisation accelerates, Indian minds will also re-discover how deeply Indian thought and culture has penetrated the history and soul of Southeast Asia.

It is a great historical mystery why most of Southeast Asia became Indianised rather than Sinicised. Of the ten Asean countries, only one, Vietnam, has clear Sinic roots in its culture. The remaining nine have cultural roots which in one way or another have emanated from all the different cultural strands of India, including Hinduism, Buddhism and even Indian Islam.

Over the past 2,000 years, China has been unified and been a stronger military and political power than India for a much longer period. Indeed, there is a long historical record of many Southeast Asian kingdoms paying tribute to the emperors in Xian or in Beijing. These include Annam (North Vietnam), Siam (Thailand), Sulu (South Philippines), Burma and Laos. In the 15th century, when Admiral Zheng He's mighty fleet of more than 200 vessels sailed through Southeast Asian waters to visit Africa, Southeast Asia was again reminded of the might of the Chinese empire. Given this prevailing might, why then did Southeast Asia not emerge as a Chinese cultural lake? This is a historical project worthy of investigation by Indian and Asean historians.

The dominant Buddhist cultures in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia can trace their roots directly to India. When one looks at the magnificent monuments of Angkor Wat, one can also trace strong Indian influence in the remarkably beautiful statues. Insular Southeast Asia, especially contemporary Malaysia and Indonesia, can trace their cultural roots to the influence of both Hinduism and Indian Islam. The founder of Indonesian nationalism, President Sukarno, expressed these connections well: "In the veins of every one of my people flows the blood of Indian ancestors and the culture that we possess is steeped through with Indian influences. Two thousand years ago people from your country (India) came to Jawadvipa and Suvarnadvipa in the spirit of brotherly love. They gave the initiative to found powerful kingdoms such as those of Sri Vijaya, Mataram and Majapahit. We then learnt to worship the very gods that you now worship still and we fashioned a culture that even today is largely identical with your own. Later we turned to Islam: but that religion too was brought by people coming from both sides of India." Indeed, Islam in Southeast Asia remained moderate and peaceful for centuries because it was brought to Southeast Asia by peaceful Indian traders, not by the sword.

Page

1

|

2

|

[Show All Pages](#)<http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print.aspx?Id=101c3c95-ebf8-430c-9b99-741fb1cea296>

