GEO-POLITICAL ASPECTS OF SOUTHEASTERN ASIA

By H. BÖRNER

Before the outbreak of the Greater East Asia War, the world was accustomed to regard southeastern Asia not as a whole but as a conglomeration of individual parts belonging to the British Empire, the USA, the Netherlands, etc. Today, however, the Rising Sun flag waves from Burma to the Solomons. The following article seeks to take account of this new situation by examining the whole of southeastern Asia from the scientific viewpoint of geo-politics. The author was a student of geography and history at the universities of Frankfurt and Innsbruck and is now living in East Asia.—K.M.

The group-life of the human race progressed from the family by way of the clan to the tribe, the principality and finally, during the last few centuries, the national state. The years after the Great War brought, with the experiment of the Geneva League of Nations, an unsuccessful attempt to go beyond the unit of the national state. Apparently the leap from the national state to a world-wide league of nations was too great. For that reason it was doomed to failure. Today the leap we are attempting is a shorter one. Historical developments are now pointing toward an intermediary stage between national state and league of nations. This stage is the continental Grossraum, an organic development proceeding from the national state.

ANCIENT BORDERS AND MODERN LIFE

This development does not aim at a new imperialism but at a union of all concerned after certain inhibitions inherent to the psychology of nations have been overcome. National traditions are not always an unmixed blessing: when it is a matter of merging into a higher unit and enmities of past times oppose this development, they sometimes prove to be a heavy burden. This is what Nietzsche meant when he said that the hard crust of the past made it difficult for new life to break through.

When one surveys the development of industry and commerce—which, free from human imponderables and unfettered by tradition, follow their own laws—it becomes obvious that they urgently demand larger fields of activity. As a result of technical progress, means of communication have grown by leaps and bounds. There is practically no limit to the size of areas that can be opened up by railways, steamers, airplanes, and motorcars. The customs borders of many countries, on the other hand, are still a product of the days of the mail coach. Mass production imperatively demands adequate facilities for mass distribution. But it also swallows up far more raw materials than formerly. The hunger for raw materials has become a characteristic of the twentieth century. In the days of free trade, it was of no importance who possessed the raw materials. But since Versailles there are such things as lack of raw materials, “have” and “have-not” states, and the struggle for raw materials as one of the main driving forces of modern history.

NEW BASES OF RAW MATERIALS

As a result of the exhaustion of the mineral wealth in the old industrial areas, where mining has been carried on for centuries, more and more attention is being paid to areas which still contain ample unexploited natural wealth. These are the countries outside of the temperate zone. The subarctic territories present great difficulties to mining and agriculture because of their harsh climate, and their
exploitation is still a matter of the future. The subtropical and tropical zones, however, have already become indispensable to the people of the temperate zone. As a result of the rapid growth of their vegetation, they are far superior to the temperate zone. A forest which requires fifty years to mature in Germany matures in ten years in the tropics. The oil palm produces many times the yield of German oil plants; rice has the highest yield per acre of all grains; and sugar cane is far superior to sugar beets.

Until about a hundred years ago, the tropical parts of Asia, Africa, and America belonged to European nations. Europe was the factory of the world, to which the raw materials were transported to be turned into goods which were then sent out again all over the world. As a result of industrial migration, secondary centers of industry arose in North America and Japan which gradually grew in importance. It was only a natural trend to try and avoid having to transport the raw materials to Europe, only to have to buy them back again in the form of finished goods, and to attempt to exploit the advantage of far cheaper native labor. The adjustment to European technology and working methods was only a question of time.

SLICING UP THE GLOBE

If in our minds we prolong this economic development into the future, the result gained is that the American and Asiatic tropics achieve independence from Europe. The fact that political developments show a similar trend is speeding this up. It would appear that the future Grossraums are forming in the shape of strips running from north to south: Europe-Africa, East Asia-Australia, North America-South America. It is interesting that each of them extends across all the climatic zones, from the cold to the tropic, thus uniting all their best products for the benefit of the whole.

Looked at from another point of view, a central industrial area borders onto a foodstuff area with an agricultural surplus which, in the south, passes over into a tropical supplementary area: industrial Europe—agrarian eastern, southeastern, and southern Europe—Africa; the industrial areas of the United States—the prairie areas—Central and South America; the industrial state of Japan—the predominantly agrarian countries of Korea, Manchoukuo, and China, and the rice granaries of the south—the tropical island world.

This picture of the future is only the straight continuation of the development of the last fifty years. Of course, this development may be slowed up or even temporarily halted by opposing forces; but in the end it will prevail.

SEAFARERS' MEETING PLACE

The wave of European discovery and conquest flowed across India and southern Asia and finally, four hundred years ago, in 1542, touched Tanegashima off Kyushu. Today the pendulum is swinging back from its outermost point, Japan. Now this country is carrying its flag to the islands of southeastern Asia from the other side. Today, as then, the islands are still the most valuable of all possessions.

In bygone days there came from the west the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British, and from the east the Spaniards—the predecessors of the United States—who conquered and administrated the Philippines from Mexico. In these southern regions they found the Chinese and Arabs, who had arrived there before them. In the sixteenth century, the Japanese, too, had had a trading post, the Nihonmashi, in the city of Malacca. The fact that seven seafaring nations met here during the age of discovery and later, prepared not only for peaceful trade but also to fight for so profitable a trade monopoly, is a proof of the lure of these regions.

What was the geo-political significance of southeastern Asia in the pre-European days? First of all, to put it negatively, it was not its fragmentary land bridge that, like the steppingstones in a Japanese garden, connected Asia with Australia. Australia has had her own separate
development as regards flora, fauna, and man. To this day the barren northern shores of Australia have not enticed anyone from Asia. It was not until the last ten years that the airplane has been able to conquer Australia’s northeastern coast. Even in the present war this coast has shown its defensive power. Moreover, the great mountain ranges pointing from China and Indo-China toward the island world have not aided communications in that direction.

THE ADVANTAGES OF ISLANDS

Instead, this significance is to be found in the very fact that the East Indian archipelago is composed of the remainders of a broken up mass of land. When this breaking up took place, thousands of islands were left standing, separated by as many inland seas. The breaking up of the land caused deep cuts and gashes, appearing as bays, which are now gradually being filled in by the rivers and form fertile alluvial rice plains.

Such swarms of islands with their connecting strips of sea—often so narrow that the opposite shore can be seen—lure men to take to the sea, to venture out into new territories. At the dawn of history they were often the nurseries of seafaring peoples. What southeastern Asia was to the Malays, the Inland Sea was to the Japanese and the Aegean Sea to the ancient Greeks. In southeastern Asia, as in Europe and Japan, the inland sea with its scattered groups of islands favored the growth of a uniform cultural sphere.

Added to these favorable means of communication is the favorable climate. The periodic monsoons and trade winds enabled the Malay to risk long voyages in his fragile outrigger without having to tack against the wind. But periodic winds also bring periodic rainfall. And the intermixture of land and sea favors a uniform climate which, moreover, is tropical owing to the latitude of those regions.

As the islands have a mountainous interior, the cultivated plains are at or near the coast, similar to the beehive structure of Japan. However, they are not isolated: as a result of favorable winds, good harbors, and short distances from the coast, they have grown together in a network. In this respect the short distances from the coast are the most important factor. For, as much as the rain and heat of the tropics promote growth, just as much do their jungles impede communications. The chief problem of the tropics is communications. The tropical island possesses the luxuriant growth of the tropics, enhanced by especially favorable rainfall connected with the nature of islands. Because of the short routes of transportation, the tropical vegetation is not a serious impediment to communications. Thus, in the early period of colonization, until about the middle of the eighteenth century, Cuba, Jamaica, Martinique, Haiti, etc., produced more colonial goods than all the rest of America put together; and the islands of Fernando Po and Réunion,
today almost unknown, were considered more valuable than all of Africa.

BARRED CONTINENTS

Today man can, by dint of his advanced technology, open up an entire tropical continent. Nevertheless, the tropical islands are still superior to the continents in respect of intensity of utilization and cheapness of production, and thus the island world of southeastern Asia is superior to the massive blocks represented by South America and Africa. This explains the apparently so curious fact that, in the age of discovery, European nations seized upon the remote tropical regions of Asia and America instead of being satisfied with the near-by tropics of Africa.

At first Africa repelled all advances. Between Europe and tropical Africa there is the obstacle of the parched Sahara, the crossing of which was even more difficult in bygone days than it is now. The African coast was equally hostile. The history of the discoveries reflects this fact: of all continents, “darkest Africa” was the last to be explored, and that not until the nineteenth century. So it came about that Europe directed its attention first to the more remote tropics instead of the near-by ones. Instead of an organic expansion toward the south, into Africa, Europe acquired possessions scattered all over the tropics of Asia, America, and the South Seas before it seized Africa.

The favorable situation of southeastern Asia has been enhanced since the age of discovery and colonization. As a result of the growing speed of communications, southeastern Asia is moving closer and closer to East Asia and India, whose overflowing human masses are slowly beginning to find an outlet there.

Moreover, southeastern Asia is shifting from an outer position between two oceans into a central position. In this age of world communications the channels between the islands have become the contested sluices of world traffic between two oceans. The oil triangle of Burma/Sumatra/Borneo has enhanced the value of these straits in its capacity as a natural filling station.

THE POPULATION

The favorable situation of this island world is also revealed in its population. The inviting coasts facilitated the immigration of new races. Out of the jungle these races created relatively cultivated areas, which in their turn attracted the next wave of peoples, who forced back their predecessors into the mountainous interior. This process has been repeated many times up to this day, and every wave has given a new impetus toward civilization. The opposite example is Australia, where the inhospitable coast had a repelling effect so that, until the Age of Discovery, the country had no influx of superior races.

We find the following racial and cultural strata in the islands:

(1) Negritos (to use their ethnological collective name): dwarfish peoples; hunters and root collectors.

(2) Indo-Austronesians: no longer dwarfish but still small, with a primitive agriculture.

(3) Proto- or Original Malays: living, like the former, in the jungle but in large clearings. Some formerly head-hunters (Dyaks and Bataks).

(4) Later or Coastal Malays: the main part of the population, the most intelligent and, culturally, the most advanced. By intermarriage with the Dutch, a so far fairly influential class of Eurasians has arisen.

(5) Europeans: Europe’s brilliant cultural history has ineradicable blemishes to show during the age of colonization. This also applies to southeastern Asia. On the other hand, these negative qualities are contrasted by positive pioneer achievements. The European has laid out roads, railways, and plantations. He has opened up the country. In generations of research work, he has explored the best locations for tropical plants and the sites of mineral resources.
The ratio of Europeans to natives was 1:250 in the Netherland East Indies, 1:750 in French Indo-China, 1:1,000 in the Philippines, 1:2,000 in Malaya, and even lower in Burma and Siam. Without the visible witnesses of the European spirit, without roads, railways, factories, schools and hospitals, without the cultivation of the jungle, the European is, in the words of Lord Curzon, "only a flock of foam on an unfathomable dark ocean."

CHINESE AND JAPANESE

(6) Chinese: It is different with the Chinese. The transformation of the land, the construction of roads, railways, and mines, were planned by the European, but it was almost always the Chinese who did the heavy, physical labor. In the West Indies and the Mississippi region, negro labor had to be brought in with great difficulty. In tropical Africa and in South America, many a European plan remained on paper because of the chronic shortage of labor. Ford's vast project for rubber plantations on the Amazon, for instance, could not be realized for this reason. In southeastern Asia, however, the population pressure of overpopulated China and India has provided an abundant influx of labor.

It cannot be sufficiently emphasized what a tremendous advantage it is for a tropical region if it has a plentiful supply of acclimatized, intelligent workers at its disposal. But a coolie does not remain a coolie. He gradually climbs up the social ladder to the rank of artisan, shopkeeper, trader, banker, and even industrial magnate, a feat which is facilitated by the fact that the natives are usually inexperienced and inefficient in money matters. Even the Chinese shopkeeper influences economic life, for instance when he boycotts certain goods. Until recently, before the Government intervened, the Chinese wholesalers monopolized the rice trade in Thailand. The family and clan system of the Chinese sees to it that, where an individual has been successful, he is always followed by relatives from his native district, with the result that the Chinese proportion of the population is constantly on the increase.

The great Chinese migration can probably only be stemmed temporarily. In her rear China has Tibet and the Gobi Desert; beyond the Pacific there is no access; so the only remaining possibilities are the northern flank (Manchoukuo) and southern flank. One must also bear in mind that southeastern Asia, just like Manchoukuo, needs the working capacity of the Chinese. The future will show how the Japanese will deal with the problem of Chinese migration. There is no place in East Asia where they will not be faced by it.

The present proportion of the Chinese in the population of Malaya is 40 per cent, of Thailand 15, the East Indies 2, French Indo-China 1.5, and the Philippines 0.5 per cent. (The last figure is so low because of the strict control of immigration.)

(7) Japanese: This last and very powerful wave is still under way before our eyes.

PAST AND FUTURE ECONOMICS

In discussing the economic situation it is useless to consult the export and import statistics of the last few years before the outbreak of the present war. After the end of this war the economic situation of southeastern Asia will no longer be that of the past, when southeastern Asia was a specialized, highly developed supplementary region, a tropical garden for the economics of the world. The reproach made by Japanese economists that the white colonial governments had not fully developed the territories entrusted to them but had forced one-sided monocultures on them is quite justified. Tin, for instance, was thoroughly exploited, iron ore more or less ignored, oil only incompletely exploited, the cultivation of rubber forced, while that of rice was curtailed—often against the will of the population—and the production of cotton, etc., entirely neglected. Why? Because of the vast distances from England, Holland, France, and the United States, all those products of
southeastern Asia which could also be produced in the mother country or its vicinity could not compete owing to the high freight charges.

Japan will now reconstruct these areas to suit East Asiatic requirements and to harmonize with Japan and China. Owing to the comparatively short transportation in this sphere, a uniform development is actually possible. The monocultures will be curtailed and other products favored. In the article "The Capital" in the April 1942 issue of this magazine (p.246), it has been shown of what there is too much and of what too little in the East Asiatic sphere. It is easy to discover these surpluses and shortages but not so easy to alter this situation. The overproduction of rubber, tin, hemp, and quinine can be cut down only very gradually, if grave economic upheavals are to be avoided. Stocks of these products will accumulate. These stocks increase Japan's war potential and will also strengthen her commercial position after the war, when all countries will experience a shortage of raw materials as a result of resurrected civilian requirements. In the long run, however, the revival of large-scale exports does not seem very probable. Just as Germany learnt from the blockade of the Great War, so the Anglo-Americans will remember the lessons of the present war. Every power will in future try to make itself safe from blockade and to produce all vital raw materials, especially those essential to its armed forces, within its own sphere.

INDO-C sci a

At those places where the parallel mountain ranges running from north to south in Indo-China diverge, the rivers were able to deposit great deltas. The alluvial plains have become the hearts of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Tonkin. Well protected by mountains, open to the south, irrigated by rivers coming from regions rich in rainfall, they have become the natural rice granaries of the world. European economic genius has multiplied production by seed selection and the construction of dikes and irrigation systems. Moreover, it has left the native product and thereby maintained economic stability, in contrast to neighboring Malaya, where the natives can do nothing with the foreign production of rubber and are entirely at the mercy of the ups and downs of the world market.

Thailand is a few decades ahead of her neighbors in the formation of her class of leaders and intellectuals.

It is of the greatest importance that Japan now holds the key to these rice granaries. Her control of the rice countries is strengthening Japan's position in Asia in the same way as her control of rubber and tin will reinforce her world position.

THE MALAYAN PENINSULA

As a result of its position between the oceans, the Malayan Peninsula is covered with dense rain forests. It also contains the richest tin deposits in the world. Tin was the driving force in its economic development. It was first mined in small quantities by the Chinese, but later on the European mining methods drew hosts of foreign laborers into the country—40 per cent of the population are Chinese, 14 per cent Indians—and opened up the country with roads and railways. This opening up of the country as a result of mining led to the idea of utilizing the road network and ample labor for planting *Hevea brasiliensis*, the rubber tree of the Amazon. In this way the major part of the peninsula was turned into a rubber forest crisscrossed by asphalt roads and railways.

This road network, probably unique in the tropics, aided General Yamashita in his blitz advance. This advance very likely signified the end of an epoch for Malaya. It is hard to believe that, on the one hand, the principle of "living space" can be carried out, and on the other, the whole world can be supplied with rubber as in the good old days of liberalism. Europe and America have possibilities of making themselves more or less independent of Malaya's rubber and tin. A curtailment of production is
therefore likely, although it cannot yet be said how great this curtailment will be. The economic world crisis of 1930/33 established a precedent. Just as then, attempts will probably be made to get rid of part of the immigrant labor, to abandon monoculture, to cut down rubber plants planted in rice fields, and to resume the planting of rice. For the monoculture in Malaya went so far that all available land was planted with rubber trees and the natives had to be fed with imported rice.

**DJAWA**

Djawa is the pearl of the Sunda Isles. It alone has 42 million inhabitants, while all the other islands together—which the Dutch used to call the “outer possessions”—have only 18 million inhabitants. Djawa has 315 people per square kilometer, and there is no other agricultural country in the world, not even Japan, which is so densely populated. One of the reasons for this is Djawa’s extraordinarily fertile soils, consisting mostly of soft Tertiary rock and the ashes of 136 volcanoes, which weather rapidly and are the most fertile soils of all.

Another reason is to be found in the agricultural policy of the Dutch, as a result of which the population rose from 16 million in 1870 to 42 million in 1930, which in turn made possible a more intensive cultivation. This increase in population on a purely agrarian basis is probably unique in the world. Although similar increases of population took place in Japan and Germany, they were only made possible by the industrialization of these countries.

A third factor which has contributed toward this success is the multiplicity of the crops grown in Djawa in contrast to the monoculture of Malai. Generally speaking, the Sunda Isles become drier from east to west and cooler with higher altitudes. This means that there are double possibilities of variation—from wet to dry and from hot to cool. By suitable horizontal and vertical shifting, the best possible locations for many tropical plants could be discovered. So far, and in accordance with the changing demands of the world market, the following crops have been raised: coffee, rubber, sugar cane, tobacco, tea, cinchona, coconuts, teak wood, spices, and rice.

As a result of this versatility, Djawa has become the most highly developed tropical country in the world. The Great War, the inflations, the economic crisis of 1930/33, enforced one production curtailment after another, problems which could not be solved by the Dutch. The blessed land can yield much more and is, so to speak, waiting for the opportunity to produce to its fullest extent under Japanese leadership.

**THE REST OF THE EAST INDIES**

Sumatra is but a weak reflection of Djawa. Less fertile soil, a steep, inhospitable coast in the west, mangrove coasts in the east, and a swampy plain, since ancient times, been less attractive to man than Djawa. Moreover, North Sumatra had first to be subjected in long-drawn-out colonial wars. It was for these reasons that the chief interest of the Dutch was concentrated on Djawa, whose production was for a long time sufficient for their demands. The actual development of Sumatra did not begin till after 1900 and offers many opportunities to the energy of the Japanese. The production of oil and the planting of tobacco, coffee, tea, etc., can still be increased.

Apart from its oil districts on the coast, Borneo has scarcely been opened up. Its capture by the Japanese was typical of this. After the occupation of the oil fields and a few ports, the campaign was ended. The interior of the island has hardly seen any Dutch; how were they to defend it?

Like Borneo, Celebes has only been opened up in spots. With the liberality of the owner of vast, rich territories, little Holland could afford to pick out the best bits from an area sixty times as large as herself and neglect entire regions out of which a conscientious colonization will be able to obtain great wealth.
The Lesser Sunda Isles become more and more dry toward the east. Maize replaces rice. As plantation colonies they are hardly to be considered.

The Spice Islands, or Moluccas, have lost much of their former glamour. A few tiny islands are quite sufficient to satisfy the world's requirements of nutmeg and cloves. The others are neglected, many of them being hardly explored.

THE PHILIPPINES

Split up into 7,000 islands, the Philippines possess centers of civilization as well as islands populated by primitive dwarfs, according to where the white man penetrated. As a result of their outer position on the edge of Asia they were hardly touched by the great religions of Asia—Islam and Buddhism—so that Christianity, brought in by the Spaniards from Mexico, found an open field. Missionization, education in Spanish culture, and the raising of the standard of living went hand in hand. To this was later added forty years of the materialistic civilization of the North Americans. The result of this mixture of Asiatic race, Spanish culture and religion, and American civilization is that the Filipino in his urban elements is superior to the Malays in spiritual and materialistic culture. His political will, too, is far more awakened, and he has proved his mettle as a soldier.

For the evaluation of the future of southeastern Asia it is important to know the reply to a question which cannot be answered yet: whether the Filipino represents the cultural vanguard of the Malays, i.e., whether all Malays are capable of the same progress, or whether the Filipino is only a particularly talented part of the Malayan race. Will the distant future see a Greater Malaya allied to its Japanese brother nation?

From a climatic point of view it is important that the northern part of the Philippines extends beyond the tropics and consequently possesses a subtropical dry season. This dry season is indispensable for the ripening of cotton. Hence the planned increase of cotton-growing at the expense of other crops promises great success in the northern part of the Philippines. The demand for cotton on the part of the Japanese cotton mills is tremendous, and it will provide very many people in the Philippines with work and bread.

JAPANESE EMIGRATION

One must not judge Japanese emigration by its numbers in Manchoukuo. The Japanese are, after all, chiefly a southern race from warm seas. For the Japanese, Hokkaido represents the northern limit to the most favorable region for their existence, and Manchoukuo is well beyond this limit. History teaches us that mass migrations have always moved toward adequate living spaces, better living conditions, and a higher standard of living, and that only a few idealists swim against the stream. This fact emphasizes the moral power of resistance and the heroism of the Japanese settlers on the Amur, but also indicates that mass migrations to the cold mainland are hardly to be expected.

The tough, industrious Japanese farmer has transformed subtropical and tropical deserts into fertile gardens as, for instance, in California, Hawaii, and northern Brazil. Now the Japanese emigrants have a chance of opening up and developing areas within their own sphere. Emigration to the South Seas has a great future, especially for peasants from the overpopulated agrarian regions. As for the urban Japanese—one fifth of Japan's population lives in cities of more than a million inhabitants—he is probably just as little suited for colonial pioneering as any of the other city dwellers of the world.

MINERAL RESOURCES

We have not said much about mineral resources yet. Here, too, conditions will be entirely changed. Hitherto, southeastern Asia has been only a supplementary area for the old colonial powers. Mining production was always subordinated to the interests of the mother country.
Consequently, only tin, which was scarce in Europe and America, was exploited to the full. Oil was only produced in such quantities as suited the policy of the great oil trusts. Coal of good quality is to be found near the coast in Tonkin, as is iron ore in Malai, the Philippines, and Hainan. In spite of the easy means of transport, the production before the war was ridiculously small. There are large deposits of copper and chromium ores which have hardly been touched yet. Now all these ores can be properly exploited, as the freight charges to the Japanese smelting furnaces are moderate, while to Europe and America they were too high. The mineral resources of southeastern Asia offer a profitable field for the Japanese.

JAPAN’S POSITION

Starting from the tropical experimental station of Formosa, Japan now dominates the entire East Asiatic garland of islands, having firmly anchored its two ends by means of the bridgeheads of Manchoukuo and Burma on the Asiatic mainland. What may have often appeared to contemporaries as a vacillation on the part of Japan between a continental and a maritime policy seems now, on looking back, to have been full of purpose.

Like a frigate of olden times, Japan has made use of the winds of world politics. With a favorable breeze she moved ahead on a straight course, in adverse winds she laboriously tacked back and forth. In spite of all changes in course, she gradually approached her distant goal—Greater East Asia. Even the Manchurian affair was but a milestone on the way, a movement to protect her rear and to safeguard her armament requirements before attempting the final step across the seas.

Japan stands in front of East Asia, from Sakhalin to the Andamans, as though with her arms outspread. It is the gesture of a true naval power, a gesture which may mean protection for a friendly China against foreign interference—or a threatening stranglehold for a hostile China. Today Japan can offer much to a friendly China and do much harm to a hostile China. Even without China, Japan now controls an area inhabited by 250 million people and holds all the trump cards that a dominating naval power can have.

At last Japan has found congenial regions in which her sea- and warmth-loving people can settle: islands washed by warm seas, and rich in rainfall and fertility. These regions are separated from the mainland by a corridor of water wide enough for the Japanese to feel remote from the mainland, yet narrow enough for them to feel united with the continent.