

The re-emergence of an integrated Asia

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MUCH has been written about Asia's rise and the economic integration of China and India with the rest of the continent.

However, these developments are not without historical precedent and it would be more appropriate to refer to Asia's "re-emergence" and "re-integration".

For the first 18 centuries after the birth of Christ, Asia – mainly China and India – dominated the world economy. During this period, Asia was also a well-integrated region of the world.

The first millennium was a period of rapid growth for India and China. Trade and commercial ties between these two countries also increased rapidly.

The opening of the Strait of Malacca in the fifth century, together with the emer-

gence of the Chola empire in South India and the Sung dynasty in China in the 10th and 11th centuries as large, unified and prosperous regional powers, provided an additional fillip to regional trade and commerce.

Together with land and sea-borne commerce, traders, missionaries, priests, adventurers and fortune-seekers moved from South Asia to South-east Asia. The Sanskrit language, Hinduism and Buddhism were like old wine lacing East Asia's culture.

According to economics professors Ronald Findlay of Columbia University and Kevin O'Rourke of Trinity College Dublin, various sub-regions of Asia had extensive trade and cultural links with one another and with the Islamic world – now known as the Middle East – by around 1,000 AD. They had little contact, however, with East and West Europe.

The late economic historian Andre

Gunder Frank noted that, from 1400 to 1800, India's trade with South-east Asia was conducted using the sea route from the ports in Bengal and on the Malabar and Coromandel coasts.

While India and the Central Asian countries were linked by the Silk Road, Frank noted that there were no direct trade links between India and China.

India exchanged cotton textiles for silk, porcelain and other ceramics with China using the same trade routes that it used for its trade with South-east Asia through the ports along the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, and in Bengal.

From the Coromandel and Malabar ports, goods were transported to Burma and Thailand and then taken over land to China. From Bengal, goods were shipped to China via Malacca.

India also traded with China through Nepal. Bengal and Assam exported textiles, indigo, spices, sugar, hides and oth-

er goods for sale to merchants in Tibet. These merchants then sold the goods in China. Payment was in Chinese products such as tea and gold.

Some economic historians have coined the terms "Farther India" or "Greater India" to describe India's influence in South-east Asia in those days.

"Farther India" comprised Indonesia, insular South-east Asia (except the Philippines) and the Indochinese and Malay Peninsula.

Soon after the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century, the world's centre of gravity shifted to Europe, and eventually to America in the 20th century.

During the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, colonial masters divided Asia into spheres of influence, took control of trade and customs, and restricted access to inland waterways.

They fragmented Asia and damaged intra-Asian trading systems.

Also, soon after independence in the late 1940s and for more than four decades, South Asia adopted an inward-looking Soviet-type development strategy and continued its isolation from the rest of Asia and the world.

The world's focus was, therefore, on East Asia and the miracle economies in the region.

Since the 1990s, Asia's internal integration has been intensifying. Asia is also starting to be "re-centred" as trade and investment between South Asia and East Asia surge. China recently became India's largest trading partner. Increased linkage between South and East Asia has led to economic prosperity breaking out all over the region.

After a break of two centuries, Asia is once again trying to return to its glorious past. Its re-emergence and re-integration will depend significantly on how its individual nations manage relations with each other. But there is a strong belief that an integrated and peaceful Asia will be realised again.

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