



EUROPEAN COLONISATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: HOW THAILAND ESCAPED THE FATE OF ITS NEIGHBOURS

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ABSTRACT

Southeast Asia is considered as one of the most important strategic locations coupled with the availability of abundant natural resources. It was indeed the stories of the spice islands and existence of the prosperous trade routes that served as a primary factor for attracting European colonisers. The colonisation process which began from the 16th century, where the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, British, and French arrived in the region seeking wealth, fame and the spread of Christianity. They gradually captured most Southeast Asian countries through military force, trade companies and treaties, reshaping local politics, economies and societies. Before European colonisation in Southeast Asia, the region was home to various powerful kingdoms such as the Khmer Empire, Pagan Empire, Srivijaya, Majapahit, Melaka and Ayutthaya. In the meantime, these powers have declined due to the arrival of Europeans resulting to the Portuguese taking over of Malacca in 1511, which was followed by Dutch control in Indonesia, British rule in Burma and Malaya and French dominance in Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos). However, in the midst of all these Thailand (then Siam) remain an exception. It was the only country in the region that successfully escaped European colonisation. This article tries to explore the European colonisation of Southeast Asia with a focus to how Thailand could retain its sovereignty. Especially the Thai aspects concerning the diplomatic skills, administrative reforms in areas of education, law, military, infrastructure, and finance particularly of the two rulers, Chulalongkorn and Mongkut, and also the favourable location of Thailand are delved with.

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Introduction

The start of European colonial expansion in Southeast Asia from the late sixteenth century is considered a decisive phase in the history of the region. For almost four hundred years the European colonisers dominated the region in their quest for '3Gs' i.e., Gold, Glory and God. In fact, the history of Southeast Asia is incomplete without the history of European colonial rule. This colonisation process was characterised by a deep exercise of European imperial power that restructured the political boundaries, economic conditions, and cultural identities in the region (Elson, 2024). The whole process gradually introduced modern administrative setups and advanced technological elements in the region as well as led to the emergence of many nation states. The first wave of the colonial expansion lasted between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and was marked by a strong competition among European colonial powers themselves for control over the spice trade because of its profitability and its huge demand in Europe. This was followed by the second phase which started after the Industrial Revolution and the rise of powerful nations in Europe, characterised by the establishment of centralised colonial administrations coupled with the introduction of new culture and education, establishment of industries and factories, and building up of transport networks. In the midst of all these new developments and consequent to the rapid colonisation in Southeast Asia, the Kingdom of Siam (modern Thailand) remains an exception. Because of a combination of positive reasons, it could escape the ever-spreading wave of colonisation that engulfed the entire of Southeast Asia.

Before the arrival of Europeans and the start of colonisation, Southeast Asia was home to diverse powerful kingdoms. The Khmer Empire was one of the most powerful empires lasting from 802 CE to 1431 CE and extended its influence over Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Southern Vietnam (Plubins, 2013). Likewise, the Pagan Empire was the first empire to unify its power and flourished in Burma (modern Myanmar) from the eleventh century to the thirteenth century, promoting the growth of Burmese language and Theravada Buddhism (Ministry of Information, Myanmar, 2023). In maritime Southeast Asia, the Srivijaya Empire was a powerful empire that flourished between seventh to thirteenth century, largely in today's Indonesia and controlling the Strait of Malacca (Britannica, 2025). Another powerful Indonesian empire that flourished from the 13th to the 16th century was the Majapahit Empire which extended its influence over the area that are covered by modern day Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, and surrounding maritime regions. This empire quickly grew into a powerful regional state whose political power extended across Southeast Asia and became a centre of religion, architecture and artistic expression (Pachauri, 2025). The Melacca Empire, founded by Parameshwara (1400 to 1528), was considered the most influential empire that exerted its control over most of the Malay Peninsula, the central and eastern part of Sumatra, the Riau Archipelago and some parts of south-west Borneo (Borschberg, 2019). In the fifteenth century and early sixteenth century, this region became the most important trading hub of Southeast Asia and also a centre for the spread of Islam to other Southeast Asian countries. The Ayutthaya Empire was another powerful and prosperous Siamese kingdom located in the present-day Thailand, founded by King Ramathibodi (1351 to 1767) and dominated Southeast Asia in many fields (Ktonie, 2024). However, the arrival of European colonisers completely changes the existing dynamics and consequently the powers of the native rulers gradually declined. It was only the Kingdom of Siam (Thailand) that survive this onslaught despite certain inconveniences and uncertainties on the part of its rulers.

Although the Europeans arrived in Southeast Asia in 1511 yet it was only from the eighteenth century that they started involving in the local affairs and establish direct contact with its inhabitants. Subsequently, fully functioning colonial administrations came up throughout the length and breadth of the region. Moreover, in due course of time, the whole of Southeast Asia, except for Thailand, find itself engulfed in the tentacles of colonisation. Not one but multiple factors contributed to this whole process.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the paper is to explore how the Kingdom of Siam or Thailand managed to keep itself free from European colonisation of Southeast Asia. By giving a brief highlight of the

various powerful empires of Southeast Asia that existed in the pre-colonial era as well as the arrival of the Europeans in the region as background the paper attempts to focus specifically on the diplomatic and administrative skills of the Thai rulers, and the strategic advantage of the country. Old and new names of places are used interchangeably wherever required.

European Colonial Expansion in Southeast Asia

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in Southeast Asia, capturing Malacca in 1511, a key strategic location and also famous for its spices and valuable camphor (Lopes, 2025). They established trading posts and colonial outposts in Goa in India, Melaka in Malaysia, Ambon and Timor in Indonesia and Macau in China (Church, 2009). However, the Portuguese territorial acquisition was limited and could not last long. They were soon followed by the Spanish establishing their first settlement on the Island of Cebu and then gradually colonising the entire of Philippines.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Dutch also arrived in Southeast Asia and soon established the trading company known as the Dutch East India Company or Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) with its regional headquarters at Batavia (present-day Jakarta) (Cartwright, 2021). In fact, both the two European merchant communities viz., the British East India Company (EIC) and the Dutch East India Company (VOC) were founded in 1600 and in 1602 respectively, with the sole objective of monopolising the spice trade (Hogendorn & Johnson, 1986). The Dutch, through the VOC, had established trading ports in many parts of Asia to control the spice trade from the eastern islands of Indonesia. It was in 1619, the VOC attacked Jayakarta and renamed it Batavia (now Jakarta). It became the capital of the Dutch East India Company (Church, 2009). The Dutch also attacked and took over Malacca City permanently and ended Portuguese rule in 1841 (Cartwright, 2021). However, by 1799, the VOC had fallen into bankruptcy. It became weak due to corruption, administrative mismanagement, and increasing competition from other Western nations. Consequently, the company was formally dissolved on 1st January 1800, and the Netherlands state took possession of its assets and titles (Bastin & Benda, 1977).

On the other hand, the British colonial quest of Southeast Asia was mainly motivated by the desire for capturing commercial trade routes to China and strategic ambitions in the region to counter the Dutch and the French. In 1786, Captain Francis Light representing the EIC negotiated with the Sultan of Kedah and officially acquired Penang Island (Prince of Wales Island) with a promise to defend and protect the Sultan of Kedah from the threats of Siam (Thailand) and Burma (Woodcock, 1969). This was the first British territorial presence in the Malay Peninsula. Likewise, in 1819, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles in search of a good British trading location founded Singapore. He landed on this thinly populated island and signed the Treaty of Friendship and Alliance with Temenggong Abdul Rahman and Tengku Hussein (Sultan of Johor) on 6th February 1819 which allowed the EIC to establish a trading post in Singapore as it is a strategic location for the British to monitor Dutch Commercial influence (Lee, 2021). In 1826, the British combined Penang, Singapore, and Malacca to form the Straits Settlements under a single administrative unit and later this region became one of the vital strategic and commercial locations in Southeast Asia (Koh, 2026).

The British conquest and annexation of Burma concluded under three phases (Waddell, 1972). Between 1824 and 1885 three major wars were fought between the British and Burma. In 1824, the First Anglo-Burmese War was fought and Burma was compelled to signed the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, resulting in the loss of the main Burmese territories such as Arakan (now Rakhine) and Tenasserim (Tanintharyi). In 1852, the Second Anglo Burmese War broke out, annexing Pegu and Rangoon. British Burma became a province of India under Chief Commissioner in Rangoon in 1862. The last British acquisition of Burma occurred on 1885 by capturing Mandalay and the surrender of the last Burmese King Thibaw. Thus, Myanmar was formally annexed by Britain in 1885 (Waddell, 1972).

As for the French colonial conquest of Indochina, consisting of modern-day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, it lasted from 1858 to 1893. The initial invasion began in 1858 in which a joint French and Spanish expedition landed in Da Nang. This was followed by the capturing of Saigon in 1859 and securing the entire southern region of Vietnam (Cochinchina) by 1867, thus becoming a French-controlled territory. French colonial governor La Grandiere had solidified control with Siam surrendering suzerainty in exchange for Battambang and Siem Reap (both belonging to Cambodia).

Later, France reclaimed these territories and consequent to it Cambodia's monarchy was transformed to a figurehead under the French. As such, Cambodia remained a French colonial territory until its independence in 1953 (Medeville, 2025)

French after controlling Vietnam and Cambodia showed its keen interest in capturing Laos. By the 1870s, Laos was under constant threat from Chinese and Thai armies (Church, 2009). Thailand took control of most of what is now Laos from the Lao principalities (Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak) in the late 18th century. France pushed Thailand to give up land east of the Mekong in 1893 (Lane, 2020). In 5th April, 1893, the French army liberated Laos from Thailand's rule by using gunboat diplomacy with warships near Bangkok. On 3rd October 1893, France signed the Bangkok Treaty with Thailand, approving the transfer of Laos' land from a Thai protectorate to a French protectorate. Thus in 1899, Laos became part of the French Indochina (Li, 2023). As almost the whole of Southeast Asian nations face European colonisation, Thailand remain the only one in the region that escaped the onslaught (Somhar T. T., 2025).

Thailand Remain Independent

When the wave of European colonisation swept the entire of Southeast Asia from sixteenth to the early twentieth century the Kingdom of Thailand remain an exception. It escaped the colonial conundrum due to decisive natural as well as human factors. Located in the centre of mainland Southeast Asia and bordered by Myanmar to the west and northwest, Laos to the northeast, Cambodia to the east, Gulf of Thailand to the east and the Malay Peninsula to the west the country, known till 1939 as Siam, was strategically in an advantageous position. However, the security and geopolitical development in the Southeast Asian region during nineteenth and twentieth century, marked by imperialist rivalry among European colonial powers, was making it hard for Thailand in safeguarding its sovereignty. The Dutch had already consolidated their rule over Indonesia, French in Indochina (which consisted of present day Vietnam, Cambodia and Vietnam) and the British was consolidating its hold over Burma and Malaya. In this situation, Thailand became the focal point of the European colonial powers. Nevertheless, the Thai rulers were able to divert the same by a display of tremendous diplomatic understanding (Somhar T. T., 2025). Under the leadership of two rulers, Mongkut (1851-1868) and Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), Thailand could skilfully thwart the colonial ambitions through an interplay of balance of power. Their skill and ability to lead the country at the critical juncture was indeed significant.

Mongkut was one of those few enlightened monarchs that the Thais had ever known. At a very young age he entered the order of monkhood and travelled extensively the whole countryside, spending most of his time in studying Buddhist scriptures but at the same time realising the realities associated with the Thai society. During this time he also studied history, astronomy and foreign languages and in due course exposed to many foreign influences and came in touch with Western missionaries. Mongkut had mastery over Sanskrit, Pali, Science and Mathematics. In the course of his monastic life, he clearly learned that China after its failure to defend against Western pressure in the Opium War of 1842, was forced to bend to Western pressures. He was conscious of the weak nature of his country and knew well that Thailand would not be able to meet the Western powers in case of an invasion. So, to avoid any interference in the internal affairs of Thailand by Western countries, he introduced several reforms and policies like the tradition of Royal Court to make easy contact with foreigners (Dung, 2017; SarDesai, 1997).

The first major diplomatic achievement of Mongkut came in 1855 with the signing Anglo-Thai Treaty known as the Bowring Treaty. According to the treaty, import and export tariffs were established, and the opium trade was legalised (Team, 2022). The British nationals were allowed to reside and move freely in Bangkok. More importantly, the British were to be governed by the extraterritoriality system under which they were not subjected to the Thai laws and courts and consequently allowed trial for any civil and criminal offense by the British consul (SarDesai, 1997).

Besides the Anglo-Thai Treaty, King Mongkut initiated several modernisation programs in the area of infrastructure, health, education, trade, transportation, communication, currency, court etiquettes, etc. Western experts were appointed to advise the king in order to facilitate the task of modernisation. His reign witnessed huge construction works in the form of bridges, brick buildings, roads and canals. For the first time a royal mint was established and currency in the form of metal coins were produced

to meet the demand of the economy (Mishra, 2010). Over and above facilities were also provided for studying foreign languages while encouraging the Princes and officials to follow the same. At the same time, the king employed a number of European advisers as heads of several government departments to overcome the country's lack of competent personnel to supervise his modernisation efforts. During the said period Great Britain was the immediate neighbour of Thailand because of its colonial control over Myanmar and Malaya, and was more powerful politically, militarily and economically than other colonial powers within the reach of Thailand. Further, the French, in its eastern flank, appear to be more dangerous to Thailand with their expansionist policy. At that juncture, the Thais use the stronger British against the rival French to minimise the losses (SarDesai, 1997). Thus, Mongkut was able to keep both the competing powers from direct interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom as well as challenging its sovereignty.

Rule of Chulalongkorn: The Decisive Phase

The trend of skilful diplomacy and able governance which marked Mongkut's rule was carried on by his eldest son Chulalongkorn. After the death of his father, Chulalongkorn (titled Rama V) ascended the throne of Thailand at age of fifteen year (Mishra, 2010). Well-trained by his father for his future leadership role he continued with whatsoever was started by Mongkut in terms of modernisation as well as foreign policy. Indeed his reign was characterised by more modernisation as well as overall socio-economic and political reforms of the country. Chulalongkorn could tackle well the challenges pose to his kingdom. It was during his reign that Thailand faced the repeat rise of international trade and commerce and the practice of colonial acquisition of territories by the European powers (Heng, 2019). In the midst of all these, he made several major reforms in the fields of economy administration, education, judiciary, transport, communication, defence etc. Chulalongkorn received traditional as well as a Western education and was well-versed in English and French. He was always curious about how other countries handle their administration. In 1871, three years after ascending the throne, he went to Singapore, Java and India in order to learn the administration of the European colonial power. During the initial period of Chulalongkorn's rule the economic condition of the country was not in a good condition as there were swelling challenges from Western powers as such he felt the need for an all round modernisation of the Thai society as well as the whole state. Modernising Thailand during that period was quite a challenge, nevertheless he put efforts into planning and drew on Western experiences to help transform his country into a modern state (Heng, 2019). In 1869, he introduced resource distribution in Thailand heavily relying on the tax farming system (Lysa, 1983). Chulalongkorn adopted the French model of revenue collection and resource distribution. In 1873, he introduced the Royal Treasury as a main agency for the collection of revenue. Again, in 1875, national revenue management was put under the jurisdiction of the Royal Treasury Department. Enough revenue was collected for the king to carry out reforms in education, defence, and communication. Within two years, state revenue was increase to 50 per cent as a result of change in tax collection (Heng, 2019).

Further, Chulalongkorn made radical changes in the existing customs and traditions of his time. He abolished both the practices of prostrating before the presence of the king and the system of slavery (Heng, 2019). In 1874, the Privy Council was created in order to discuss important matters and to assist the king in the enactment of new laws for the kingdom (Engel, 1975).

In the administration, Chulalongkorn introduced many reforms for correcting defects dating from the fifteenth century which led to the erosion of central government, overlapping jurisdiction, confusion due to blending of military, civil and judiciary functions, corruption and a huge decline in revenues. He introduced central government's authority into the provinces, districts, and villages (SarDesai, 1997). In 1892, Prince Damrong, who had his education in England, was allowed to take charge of the Ministry of the Interior and assumed responsibility of the provincial administration (SarDesai, 1997).

In 1887, Chulalongkorn also modernised Thai army by creating a separate department for army with advanced Western military technologies and founded the Royal Military Academy and the Naval Academy to cultivate modern officers in order to suppress any local rebellion. He also procured modern weaponry and developed a powerful navy to safeguard Thailand's sovereignty.

To add to all the above, the period of Chulalongkorn's reign also witnessed modern systematisation

of Siamese laws, as its old judicial system was brutal and not applicable to Westerners. The Western powers forced Thailand to accept extraterritorial rights, ensuring that western nationals were exempted from Siamese local laws. To obtain relief from the extraterritorial rights of Westerners, it was necessary for the country to reform its judicial and legal system to meet Western powers. Subsequently, Chulalongkorn borrowed legal models from Britain, India, Japan, China, and the USA (Heng, 2019). This helped in maintaining a balanced relationship between Thailand and the adjoining competing colonial powers.

Another important achievement of Chulalongkorn was the reforms he carried out in the field of education. He established schools and introduced secular education, offering training in civil services including international relations, engineering, medicine, and commerce as its curriculum. In 1887, a separate department of education was created and the king provided scholarships to students and sent the princes and scholars abroad for further study in higher education.

Chulalongkorn also established medical schools, supplied medicines, carried out vaccination for small pox and helped persons suffering from leprosy. The first public hospital in the country came up in 1887 at Sirirat and offered both indigenous and Western medicines.

Financial sector too saw lots of transformation during Chulalongkorn's time. The bureaucracy was financially centralised and any recruitment of staff was conducted based on modern educational background. In 1896, Alfred Mitchell-Innes, a British diplomat was appointed as a financial advisor of the king. Paper money was introduced in 1902 replacing flat silver coins and Bhat became the official currency of Thailand. Revenue increased from 1.6 million Bhat in 1874 to 57 million Bhat in 32 years, and collected revenues from taxes were deposited in the treasury and all the expenditures were accounted (Mishra, 2010).

Chulalongkorn's rule was also characterised for its remarkable technological advancements in the fields of roads, bridges, canals and water gates. With the improvements in infrastructure, Bangkok appears like a modern city. Electricity was installed in the palace of the king with the help of European technicians and in 1875 the royal telegraph was established. The transport system was revolutionised in the country with the introduction of the railway.

In the midst of all these, the late nineteenth century witnessed an increase in colonial ambitions of the British and the French in Southeast Asia. As a result, the British had consolidated their hold in Burma and the Malay Peninsula while France also controlled Indochina. Soon both the colonial powers started showing their interest in taking over of the prosperous Thailand. It led to the start of clashes at the border between the Thai and French armed forces culminating to a conflict known as the Battle of Paknam (Mishra, 2010). This battle resulted into the death of a French Sergeant and the capture of a French captain. France used this as an excuse and sent two gunboats to the Chao Phraya river and anchored it at a distance of three miles from the royal palace (Heng, 2019). Thailand was not strong enough to challenge the French naval onslaught so in order to arrive at a peaceful conclusion a Franco-Siamese Treaty was signed in 1893 (Heng, 2019). It also concluded an understanding with Britain in the same viewpoint. Ultimately, because of his diplomatic skill and able leadership Chulalongkorn could establish a lasting understanding with both Great Britain and France for maintaining Thailand as a buffer state between British Burma and French Indochina (Mishra, 2010). This, indeed, was an achievement of Chulalongkorn that finally discerned Thailand's fears of ultimate annihilation and colonial subjugation.

Conclusion

Finally, the fact remains that the colonisation of Southeast Asia by European nations drastically transformed the political demarcations, borders, economies, introduced new laws and an education system at the same time it also caused exploitation and disruption to the traditional social fabrics of the region. In fact, the European colonial powers of the time acquired direct control over most countries of Southeast Asia over a period spanning nearly four centuries. However, despite facing serious threats from Western powers, the history of Thailand remains exceptional compared to the rest of Southeast Asian countries as it was the only country in the region that escaped European colonial rule. As already mentioned, this was made possible because of the capability and farsightedness of the two Thai rulers, Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn, who implemented several reforms in administration, education and law to adjust to the changing times.

Indeed, Thailand was really blessed to have such great and charismatic personalities as rulers who played the diplomatic game well and introduced timely reforms to preserve the Thai identity and independence. Thus, the contributions of the two rulers as well as the geostrategic location of the country make it possible for the Kingdom of Thailand to remain as the only independent country in Southeast Asia during the high tide of European colonisation, a remarkable chapter in the history of the region.

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