Russia at present is cooperating more and more closely with China: We have many things in common and high hopes for the future. Therefore, it would be advisable for us to know our partner well, including how it treats its neighbors to the south and southwest, which, as analysis shows, are obvious targets of Chinese expansion.

This expansion did not begin in the recent past; it has deep historical and cultural roots. China and the countries of Southeast Asia established ties and contacts with each other many centuries ago. There was a time when the border between China and Southeast Asia lay much further north than it currently does — on the southern bank of the Yangtze. To the south of it there were a variety of countries populated by the Viet and Tibeto-Burman peoples that gradually disappeared from the map of the world as ancient China expanded. Today, they are integral parts of Chinese territory. The most striking example of this historical dynamic is the formation of several states in the south of present-day Indochina that were founded by Thais who came from the modern Chinese province of Yunnan. Their original country of Nanzhao fell to attacks by the Mongols in the 13th century. It was later populated by the Chinese and become one of the Middle Kingdom’s provinces. The Burmese resettled far to the south under Chinese military and demographic pressure. Virtually all of the Viet states in the modern Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi disappeared. The territory of modern-day North Vietnam was under the control of various Chinese dynasties for almost 1000 years, and only the overall weakening of China in the 10th century and a decisive struggle for independence by the Vietnamese made it possible to restore the state of Vietnam in the far south-west of what were once very large Viet possessions.

The historical processes associated with China’s sustained expansion to the south and south-west could be discussed at length and in detail. It is a fascinating subject; in a way, however, it is rather one-sided — quite clearly, China for a long time sought consistently to expand to the south and south-west, and it sent armies at the first opportunity to increase its territory on its southern and south-western borders. The latest of China’s many attempts to conquer Vietnam occurred in the late 18th century when, in December 1788, a Chinese army of more than 200,000 men invaded Vietnam in four columns. The last full-scale invasion of Burma by Chinese forces took place in several waves between 1767 and 1770.

Vietnam and Burma — key Southeast Asian countries that share borders with China — have managed to defend their independence, in contrast to the Khanate of Junggar in Xinjiang, which had been defeated by the Qing armies and absorbed into China 10 years before the march to Burma. Their victories allowed them to preserve their freedom, although the rulers of Vietnam and Burma acknowledged Chinese suzerainty in formal treaties with the Qing Empire. They were forced several times in the complex history of relations between these countries and their “northern neighbor” to recognize the suzerainty of Beijing in order to relieve pressure from China. In reality, the suzerainty was largely a formality because Beijing lacked the capability to seriously limit the independence of local rulers. That
is how the countries of Southeast Asia viewed Chinese suzerainty: a mere formality and a matter of status. In China, where the arrival of an embassy from Southeast Asia was identified with “an expression of reverent submission to the Son of Heaven,” this suzerainty was considered evidence of their actual subjugation and acknowledgment of Chinese superiority and supremacy.

Thus, there originally was a serious discrepancy in the way Chinese suzerainty over the Southeast Asian countries was understood — whereas in Southeast Asia they understood the illusory nature of Chinese supremacy quite clearly, Beijing seriously considered the states in the region to be, if not directly subordinate to the Emperor, then vassals and part of the territory ruled by China. This contradiction — which was of little importance in the past — has now become one of the main drivers of Chinese expansion into Southeast Asia.

**Colonial times**

The subordination of Southeast Asian countries other than Thailand to European powers both halted and reversed the Chinese advance to the south. The existing Chinese suzerainty over the countries of Southeast Asia was formally eliminated by their new colonial masters and, accordingly, China no longer had any legal basis to claim general supremacy in the region. Under pressure from the Europeans, China signed treaties formally renouncing its rights as supreme sovereign of the border states it controlled. China did that because, wracked by internal contradictions, it yielded to the European powers in all respects after decisively losing the First (1840-1842) and Second Opium Wars (1859-1861).

China was forced to make very serious concessions to England on its border with Burma and to France on its border with Laos when Beijing acknowledged the accession of the Laotian principalities to France’s Indo-Chinese alliance. The Chinese government considered the principalities to at least be under its supreme suzerainty, if not Chinese possessions. Moreover, the French even attached two principalities to the territory of the future Laos that had been part of the Chinese province of Yunnan. This was the first time in many centuries that any Chinese territory bordering on the countries of Southeast Asia had left Chinese territory and become independent of its government. China had never before been subjected to such humiliation in Southeast Asia.

China during that period behaved with extreme caution regarding territorial jurisdiction over the Paracel and Spratly Islands, which are located in the South China Sea. Today, it says those islands are an integral part of its territory, and it is trying to gain control of them. Beijing’s efforts have transformed the standoff in the South China Sea into one of the most acute problems of global politics because of its clash of interests with the United States and the threat to the international sea routes that pass through there. The situation here looked quite different a little over 100 years ago. At that time, China not only made no formal claim to the islands, it even renounced possession of them. We see evidence of that in an interesting episode that took place in the early 1990s. The German ship Bellona and the Japanese Imezi Maru sank with a cargo of British copper in shallow waters near the Amphitrite Island group of the Paracel Islands. Some of the copper later turned up on the Chinese island of Hainan. Although the cargo had sunk, it was still British property, so the British ambassador officially protested the looting of the cargo in Chinese territorial waters to the Chinese government. The Chinese Foreign Ministry officially responded that “China cannot be held responsible for the theft of the sunken cargo because the Paracel Islands do not belong to it.” The absence of Chinese claims to possess the Paracel and Spratly Islands was recorded and published in the 1905 General Map of the Great Ching Empire, which shows only Hainan Island as belonging to China in the South China Sea. A Chinese gazetteer was published in 1906 that showed Cape Zhou on Hainan Island as China’s extreme southern tip.

To be continued...

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