UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Aleš Karmazin, Michal Kolmaš and Guangyu Qiao-Franco

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Chapter 2

COLONIALISM AND THE MODERN STATE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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COLONIALISM AND THE MODERN STATE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has been a venue of rich cultural, economic, and political exchanges for centuries. Besides developments within the region, the Indo-Pacific has also been shaped by external influences. For example, Muslim traders were active in the region for several centuries, and Muslim rulers and dynasties also conquered and ruled parts of the Indian subcontinent over several centuries. Perhaps most notably, they established the Mughal Empire (1526–1857), one of the most centralized and long-lasting dynasties in South Asia. However, the European penetration into the Indo-Pacific was arguably even more consequential in terms of changing power dynamics across the region as a whole. European influence became evident through the process of colonization. Although it had a wide-ranging political, social, and economic impact on Asian politics and societies, colonization proved to be particularly significant in shaping state-building in the region. This impact was evident in multiple ways—from the redrawing of territorial boundaries and changing the regional states' status within the international system, to establishing new governmental structures, and sparking the emergence of national liberation movements. The latter then contributed to decolonization, which mainly took place shortly after World War II and which led to the creation of independent modern sovereign states in the region. The topics of colonization, decolonization, and the character of statehood and sovereignty in the Indo-Pacific also constitute the central focus of this chapter.

The notion of sovereignty is understood, used, and characterized differently in the existing academic literature. However, for the purpose of this chapter, we offer a basic theoretical outline of the modern sovereign state based on three fundamental features, which relate to the organizational structure of statehood. First, as one

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of the most famous definitions of sovereignty in International Relations (IR) argues, "the idea of sovereignty was the idea that there is final and absolute authority in the political community" (Hinsley 1986, 26). Simultaneously, this final domestic authority should not be subordinated to any external authority and should have a monopoly over the legitimate use of force in the given territory. Second, sovereign authorities are supposed to be formally equal in their interactions on the international level (Bartelson 1995; Krasner 1999; Shinoda 2000). Third, territories of sovereign states are demarcated by borders and, hence, territories of different states are mutually exclusive, rather than overlapping (Bartelson 1995; Shinoda 2000). This understanding of the modern sovereign state is largely interchangeable with what is often called the Westphalian, conservative, traditional, or conventional type of sovereignty. While this conceptualization has formed a relatively stable ideal-typical model of modern sovereignty (Bartelson 2014), it is crucial to emphasize that sovereignty in practice has been more fluid and shaped by political dynamics (Anghie 2005; Grovogui 2002; Karmazin 2023; Krasner 1999).

In a similar sense, it should also be noted that the emergence of modern sovereignty is not tied to a single moment in history. In many IR textbooks, the signing of peace treaties at the end of the 30 Years' War in Europe in 1648—known as the Peace of Westphalia—is presented as the event that laid the foundations for modern sovereignty. Although this view has been proven to be largely inaccurate (Osiander 2001; Teschke 2003), the notion of "Westphalian sovereignty" continues to be widely used in IR as an abbreviation for the conventional understanding of sovereignty.

In fact, there is no clear consensus as to when exactly sovereignty originated. Some authors trace the origins back to the Renaissance period in Europe when alternative polity forms (such as city-states and leagues of states) proved to be ineffective and new philosophical ideas emerged (Ruggie 1993; Spruyt 1996). Others point to a gradual process of consolidation of sovereignty from the 17th to the 19th centuries (Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017; Philpott 2001; Teschke 2003). In the 19th century, the idea of sovereignty started to be connected with the existence of nations as a dominant way of defining the political identity of people, which gave rise to the concept of nation-states. Simultaneously, developments outside Europe also contributed to the establishment of the conventional notion of sovereignty. In their colonial endeavors, European powers began employing newer techniques of map-making and demarcating space, which were transported back to Europe and contributed to the development of the modern conception of borders and the idea of territorial exclusivity (Branch 2013). Simultaneously, Europe was influenced by the gradual transmission of ideas from Asia, where the Mongolians pioneered the conception of political authority based on performance, rather than the divine right to rule. In this view, a ruler, not God or gods, was the ultimate source of lawmaking and the ultimate locus of political legitimacy (Zarakol 2022, see also Chapter 1 in this book), which is the same view that is central to some of the key Western theories of modern sovereignty (especially Schmitt 1996).

Another key development that brought about the *global* dissemination of modern sovereignty was decolonization. While modern sovereign states gradually became the dominant form of political organization within Europe from the 17th to the 19th century, Western powers simultaneously sustained extensive colonial empires whose structures stood in sharp contrast to the constitutive features of modern sovereignty, such as formal equality and territorial exclusivity. Moreover, it needs to be said, traditional (pre-colonization) ways of organizing political order in the Indo-Pacific do not align with the model of the modern sovereign state either. The traditional Sino-centric system rested upon the idea of the Chinese emperor's symbolic authority over the whole world and other rulers. The political organization of Japan in the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) was characterized by the interplay of three kinds of political authorities: Tokugawa shoguns, who had the strongest position, local lords (daimyo), and the (rather weak) emperor. The mandala system in Southeast Asia was composed of overlapping territorial and political organizations of kingdoms. The state-formation process in South Asia before the 20th century was often defined by sovereignty negotiated, shared, and divided among imperial and local centers (see Chapter 1).

In this chapter, we argue that the processes of colonization, decolonization, and the emergence of modern sovereign states in the Indo-Pacific were connected. In a sense, the modern state rose to prominence as a response to colonial encounters during which Asian societies were subjugated to political control from outside. Moreover, even though sovereignty continues to be cherished in the region as a highly important political principle, the current states in the Indo-Pacific are still often influenced by colonial and imperial legacies. In other words, regional countries can to a large extent be defined as modern sovereign states, but also as post-colonial and post-imperial states in many respects, and this characterization remains relevant even into the early 21st century.

This chapter is divided into two main parts. First, we discuss colonization and decolonization with the aim of providing a historical overview, which complements the macro-historical account presented in Chapter 1 with more empirical details. We do so to showcase key political changes and the main forms of Western influence in the Indo-Pacific during the colonial period. We proceed chronologically and identify three main phases: First, colonization before the 19th century; second, imperialism, characterized by the development of more comprehensive and consolidated colonial empires in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries; and third, decolonization. Although local resistance and efforts to expel foreign intrusion were present throughout the entire history of colonization, we believe it makes sense to highlight the latest phase of decolonial efforts (that is, mainly the 20th century), which eventually led to the independence of regional countries. The second main part intends to offer a more analytical insight into the character of modern sovereign states in the region and indicate the specific ways in which colonial and imperial legacies remain relevant.

Colonization before the 19th Century

This section maps the process of colonization in the Indo-Pacific from its early origins to the gradual consolidation of colonial rule. During the early phase, European colonizers mainly controlled some important urban centers, ports, or smaller coastal areas. However, their influence was relatively limited outside of those areas and they rarely acted as formal rulers of whole countries prior to the 19th century. The most notable exception in this regard was Spanish colonial rule over the territory of the Philippines, governed by and incorporated into the Spanish colonial empire in the 16th century. However, European presence increased over time, even beyond the territory of the Philippines, and so they eventually established a strong presence in the region. As such, this period is important for understanding how the colonization process unfolded and became critical for the fate of societies and politics in East, Southeast, and South Asia.

The beginnings of the colonization process go back to the 15th century when Europeans embarked on sea voyages down the Western coast of Africa and further afield. The Spanish and Portuguese were the dominant actors in the early stages of this process. Their initial motivations compromised the attempt to establish new naval trade connections with India and other adjacent areas and the ambition of spreading Christianity. While Europeans often portrayed (and sometimes still portray) these voyages as discovery expeditions, these missions were closely tied to geopolitical aspirations. With the agreement of the Pope as the head of the Catholic Church, Spain and Portugal signed the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494 and then the Treaty of Zaragoza in 1529, which divided the world into zones of influence given to the Spanish and Portuguese (Ringmar 2019, 182–183). Although these treaties had a limited impact on Asia and other European powers interrupted the duopoly of Spain and Portugal in the 17th century, this early episode illustrates how Europeans perceived themselves as superior to non-Europeans and how they channeled considerable power and ambition into colonization.

As just indicated, Spain and Portugal were the key colonizers in the Indo-Pacific by the end of the 16th century. The Portuguese established their presence in the territory of contemporary Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere. They typically controlled small strategically located outposts and trading ports, perhaps most notably the critical port of Malacca (now in Malaysia). They even founded some of them, such as Nagasaki in Japan. However, they were relatively quickly pushed out of many of these territories by other European powers or local rulers. Hence, the longest-lasting bases for Portuguese activities were small areas in India—namely Goa, Daman, and Diu (1500s–1961), the city of Macao (1557–1999) in China, and the eastern part of Timor (1702–1975) (Ferro 1997, 23–28). The island of Timor served as a site of Dutch-Portuguese colonial rivalry, ultimately leading to its division between the two powers during the colonial period. This division persists today in the form of two states: Indonesia, which governs the western part of the island, and Timor-Leste, an independent state occupying the eastern part (Molnar 2009).

Besides the territorially and temporarily limited presence of the Portuguese across the whole Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia in particular was the initial target of colonization. The first of the bigger colonies formally incorporated under the direct control of Europeans was the Philippines, ruled over by Spain. Although Spanish colonial enterprise mainly aimed at the Americas, the Philippines was controlled by Spain until 1898 and then by the United States until 1946. Before the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century, there was no politically unified country in the territory of the present-day Philippines, and communities living there were ethnically and linguistically diverse. There were Muslim states as well as Chinese, Japanese, and Indian influences. European colonizers made use of this fragmentation and these differences, which was a rather typical strategy of colonizers even beyond the Philippines (Ferro 1997). This approach eventually enabled the Spanish to gain the upper hand over the local rulers in the Philippines.

The process of European colonization of the Philippines was quicker and more straightforward than in many other cases in the region. Ferdinand Magellan claimed the Philippines for Spain in 1521, but there was no regular Spanish presence in this area until the 1540s. Spain started to integrate the Philippines more closely into their empire in the 1560s and 1570s, and from that time until 1821, the Philippines was part of the Mexico-based Viceroyalty of the so-called New Spain. This remained the case despite some clashes with the Dutch and Brits. The Spanish ruling authority largely relied on solidifying the positions of local indigenous leaders who were incorporated into a broader governmental system and facilitated a practical side of governance (Murphey and Stapleton 2019, 236–241). This strategy was rather successful and reinforced the pattern of patron-client relations, which play an important role in Filipino society until today (cf. Doronila 1985; Soon 2012).

Under Spanish control, the Philippines was connected to emerging global trade as shipments of silver, very often from Mexico or Peru, were carried to Manila and then typically went on to China to pay for silk and other materials, which in turn traveled to Spain or other Spanish colonial possessions. Simultaneously, Filipino society experienced migration from Spain and even more so from Latin America. Owing to its long-term indoctrination among local inhabitants, Christianity became the primary religion in the Philippines, with catholic clergy contributing hugely to the preservation of colonial governance (cf. Schirmer and Shalom 1999).

The colonization of other areas in Southeast and South Asia is largely tied to the creation of the so-called East India Companies of the other key European powers. The British and the Dutch were the first nations that followed the Spanish and Portuguese in their colonial efforts in the Indo-Pacific region, which founded their East India Companies at the beginning of the 17th century. After initial short-lived and unsuccessful attempts to operate trading companies to compete with Britain and the Netherlands, the French eventually established a major company of this kind in 1664. The East India Companies were joint-stock enterprises that received extensive authorization to manage relations with Asia. Governments and rulers in their home countries endowed them with significant powers, including the capacity to

wage wars, administer non-European territories under their control, collect taxes, or mint currencies (Phillips and Sharman 2020). These companies were primarily interested in generating economic profit, and while they did engage in power politics in Southeast and South Asia, their presence did not initially lead to the creation of comprehensive colonial states under the direct command of the respective European powers. The establishment of direct colonial control and more complex colonial empires took place later, predominantly in the 19th century, which is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

After the creation of their company, the Dutch quickly established their presence in what became their main colonial possession in Southeast Asia and what is currently known as Indonesia. They arrived in a politically, ethnically, socially, and linguistically diverse environment with a strong presence of Javanese, Malay, Muslim, Chinese, and other traders who developed a thick network of connections between Indonesia and the whole region. Before, during, and even after the arrival of European colonizers, there were some strong kingdoms but no truly unified polity across the whole territory of current Indonesia. Many of the local rulers even regarded the European presence in Indonesia to be of relatively marginal importance during the 17th century (Brown 2003, 39; Abdullah 1994).

Soon after their arrival, the Dutch expelled both the Portuguese and the Brits and established Batavia (now Jakarta) as their main headquarters. The Dutch East India Company also joined the local political game, largely characterized by the aspiration of local houses to achieve dominance, and gradually expanded its prominence. One of the most important examples of the complex political contestation was the Third Javanese War of Succession in the mid-18th century, in which the Sultanate of Mataram—the last major independent kingdom in Java at that time—supported a Chinese rebellion against the Dutch. However, the war eventually only increased the Company's control over the strategically critical island of Java. It is, nonetheless, important to highlight that the Company did not penetrate the whole territory of Indonesia. For example, the presence of the Dutch was limited in Borneo and Sulawesi in the 17th and 18th centuries (Steenbrink 2006). The Dutch established a rigid racial and social hierarchy, with Europeans at the top and native Indonesians at the bottom. Indigenous elites were co-opted into the colonial system as intermediaries (cf. Tirtosudarmo 2022). Despite considerable political success, the Dutch East India Company experienced significant financial losses at the end of the 18th century and was eventually dissolved due to bankruptcy in 1799. The Dutch state overtook the Company's possessions and, despite Britain's and France's efforts to capitalize on the instability and gain more presence in the archipelago, was able to consolidate the possessions under its direct rule (Tarling 2003, 134–142).

The case of Taiwan is another illustrative example of the complexities, dynamics, and limits of colonization in the period before the 19th century. Taiwan did not undergo a full-scale colonization by a foreign power until 1895, when it was seized by Japan following the First Sino-Japanese War, yet it was noticeably affected by

external intrusion. The Dutch and the Spanish established their colonial bases in Taiwan in the first half of the 17th century. They were involved in a mutual conflict as well as local power dynamics. While the Dutch were more successful than the Spanish, they did not manage to control the whole island and were themselves expelled by loyalists to the fallen Ming dynasty (previously ruling in mainland China) who resorted to the island. In the late 17th century, Taiwan was incorporated into the Chinese empire, now ruled by the Qing dynasty (Manthorpe 2005; Teng 2006).

Great Britain was another major colonial player in the Indo-Pacific. However, it enjoyed only minimal success in Southeast Asia prior to the 19th century. By the 1630s, the British lost the competition to control the current territory of Indonesia to the Dutch, and their future attempts to capitalize on brief episodes of Dutch weakness in Indonesia were not successful either. The British East India Company managed to establish a trading port in Penang as its initial base in Malaysia, but was only able to expand its influence in Malaya later (in the 19th century). As a result of that, it decided to shift its focus from the spice trade, for which Indonesia was instrumental, to India and the textile trade by the mid-17th century. This was a key strategic business move because, around this time, the spice trade profits were about to reach their peak while cotton, silks, and other textiles were becoming ever more lucrative (Phillips and Sharman 2020, 48–65; Veevers 2020).

In India, the British East India Company faced competition from the Portuguese and French, but neither of these nations was able to establish supremacy in South Asia during the early colonial period. This was largely due to the fact that from 1526, India was ruled by the Mughals, who established a strong and consolidated empire. Their empire stretched across a large part of South Asia, held about 20–25% of the world's GDP at that time, and was stronger than European great powers in many respects. Nonetheless, the Mughal Empire granted the British East India Company permission to trade in some Indian ports in the early 17th century (Murphey and Stapleton 2019, 256–57). The Mughal-British cooperation was mutually beneficial, and both sides prospered spectacularly for the rest of the 17th century (Veevers 2020, 57–134).

However, the situation changed significantly in the early 18th century. The Mughal Empire overstretched its capabilities during its southward expansion and enforced orthodox Islamist policies, including the persecution of Hindus, Sikhs, and other religious groups. This resulted in anti-Mughal rebellions led by Muslim non-believers. Although the Empire tried to rectify some of its mistakes, the period of the early 18th century is usually understood as the beginning of the Empire's decline and the deterioration of its centralized power over India. Great Britain and France saw the destabilization of the Mughal Empire as a window of opportunity for increasing their presence in India, especially as they did not have any other significant colonies in the Indo-Pacific (Dalrymple 2019; Veevers 2020).

The relationship between Britain and France became increasingly hostile and violent, not only in India but in other parts of the world as well. Their confrontations became part of the Seven Years' War (1756–1763)—a global conflict involving

many European powers and taking place in Europe, the Americas, and Asia. France was not particularly successful in the war when considering the overall global context, and it experienced some of its key losses in India. Although France retained some small colonial possessions in India until the mid-20th century, the war marked the end of France as a significant colonial power in India. As such, the Seven Years' War was a turning point that marked the beginning of Britain's global colonial dominance as well as its preponderance in India (Baugh 2014).

In the 1750s and 1760s, the British East India Company achieved victories in key military engagements with Indian rulers (the Battle of Plassey and the Battle of Buxar). As a result, it gained control of some of the key parts of India (especially its eastern parts) and was granted the right to collect taxes in Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha (formerly Orissa), which were among the richest places not only in India but worldwide. While the Mughal Empire still existed, the Company changed from a commercial actor to a governing body and continued to increase its influence even in the upcoming decades. The Company prioritized revenue extraction, often through high taxation and monopolization of trade. Profits were largely exported to the Company's shareholders in Britain with little reinvestment in India. These developments contributed to the emergence of problems in Bengal's economy and even a large-scale famine in 1770. Hence, the Company's rule also led to significant problems, which prefigured future crises (Dalrymple 2019). These questions, however, are discussed in the following section.

Imperialism

In Asia and elsewhere, the process of creating more complex and consolidated colonial empires—widely referred to as imperialism—accelerated in the second half of the 19th century and lasted until the commencement of the main wave of decolonization around the mid-20th century. The increased ability of European powers to exert direct control over Asian polities and societies was caused by a significant rise in European power. As outlined in Chapter 1, this global power shift stemmed from the Industrial Revolution in Europe and was intertwined with broader political and social transformations.

The intensified colonial endeavor of the Western states during the second half of the 19th century was also stimulated by a new wave of great power competition among European countries and the emergence of (new) great powers in and outside Europe. The likes of Germany, the United States, Japan, and Belgium increased their prominence in international affairs and exhibited ambitions to acquire colonial possessions, seeking material gains as well as aspiring to demonstrate their great-power status. This wave of competition over current colonies and those regions which, in the eyes of the great powers, could become new colonies also manifested in the economic realm. The period of the 1860s and, especially, the 1870s marked the shift from the previous period of somewhat more open economic policies. The colonizers started to adopt mercantilist (protectionist) policies within individual empires, which

resulted from and further contributed to the heated geopolitical competition and the colonizers' effort to solidify control over their colonies (cf. e.g. Tarling 2003).

Another notable development in this period was the growing attention of Western colonial powers to East Asia—a region that had previously remained insulated from colonial interference, with particular exceptions like Macao. As a result, China and Japan experienced conflicts with Western powers and started to integrate into an emerging global political order. We start our discussion by focusing on those colonies that were established before the 19th century. We return to the dynamics of colonialism and imperialism in East Asia later in this section.

The rise of imperialism was preceded by the crises of the East India Companies as a key mechanism of European influence over South and Southeast Asian colonies. It compelled Great Britain and the Netherlands, two major colonial players in the Indo-Pacific, to engage more directly in colonial endeavors and consolidate colonial governmental structures under their control in the key territories, especially in India and Indonesia. We start by looking at the British engagement in India and use this case for a closer illustration of the developments and mechanisms of European imperialism. As will be shown, the crisis of the British East India Company's rule unfolded over several stages.

Around the mid-18th century, when the British East India Company became the key political power in South Asia, it had just about 250 civil servants and administrators to run the Company's operation in India (Dalrymple 2019, 100). In the same period, the Company was also, with some exceptions of the British state's direct military help, dependent on hiring mercenaries, including local inhabitants, to enforce its position in South Asia. Notably, it was a common tactic of European states to use the services of privateers and mercenaries as a means of foreign policy. This approach had lasted over much of the Middle Ages and had become fully delegitimized only in the 19th century when the states started to establish their full monopolies over violence (Thomson 1996). In the same vein, violence was even marketized in India, and the British East India Company capitalized on its ability to offer substantial payments to Indian mercenaries to fight on behalf of the Company (Dalrymple 2019).

The first significant crisis of the Company's rule occurred in the early 1770s after a large-scale famine (1769–1770), caused mainly by the Company's hard extractive policies. Due to the famine, the Company started to face dire economic problems, which spilled over to the banking sector and brought about the bankruptcy of over 30 banks in Britain in 1772–1773 (Kosmetatos 2018). In response to that, the British state took the initial step to oversee the Company in 1773 and established the post of Governor-General of Bengal, with supervisory powers over other British territories in India. Moreover, after a series of wars and clashes between the Brits and local Indian rulers who tried to stand up to British influence, the Company was able to amass considerable military strength, and its power peaked around 1800 (Dalrymple 2019).

The Company gradually became overseen by the British state even more closely. However, the key turning point took place in the mid-19th century and was tied to

the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857 (also known as the Indian Rebellion of 1857). It represented the strongest revolt against the British thus far. Vinayak Damodar (Veer) Savarkar, who has become an inspiring figure for contemporary right-wing Hindu nationalism, later interpreted the revolt as the first war of Indian independence (Savarkar 2022). Although the event started as a mutiny of Indian soldiers, it quickly turned into a wider uprising and spread throughout India, which indicates structural reasons for the Indian resistance. These causes were complex and had political, economic, and social dimensions. For example, the Company removed many local rulers and lords, which Indians often interpreted as an illegitimate and aggressive practice. The British also imposed heavy taxation, and there was a growing suspicion that the British were trying to convert Indians to Christianity (Fremont-Barnes and O'Neill 2007).

The British reaction was brutal and included public executions, destruction of villages, and mass punishments. The last Mughal emperor was exiled from Delhi, marking the official end of the dynasty's rule. At the same time, the British East India Company was dissolved in 1858, and the British government took direct control of India, establishing the British Raj. Governance was now in the hands of the British Crown, administered through a Secretary of State for India in London, and the executive representative based in India, whose title was renamed as Viceroy and Governor General of India (simply known as Viceroy). At the same time, the British governance model in India gradually evolved to incorporate limited Indian participation over time. The British also started to develop a robust bureaucratic apparatus and reorganized the army, stationing a considerable number of British troops in India and supplementing them with groups considered loyal, such as Sikhs and Gurkhas. They also promised respect to Indian princes and religions. This entailed formal recognition of the so-called princely states, which were excluded from British India proper and placed under indirect colonial rule. Numbering over 500, these states covered almost half of the subcontinent's territory. While control of foreign affairs, defense, and communications was transferred to the British, domestic authority remained with the local rulers. In practice, a British political agent was often stationed at the court to monitor and advise on internal matters (Dalrymple 2019; cf. Naseemullah 2018; Naseemullah and Staniland 2014).

The overall political situation was relatively stable for the rest of the 19th century. At the same time, nonetheless, important changes in Indian society were taking place, including the rise of a new urban middle class and the spread of printing and vernacular literature. Various religious and social reform movements started to play an active role. Many of them were bottom-up movements initiated by the public sphere, including Indian elites as well as low castes (Gilmour 2019; O'Hanlon 2007). However, one of the most consequential political platforms to emerge was the Indian National Congress, established by a retired British civil servant who sought to bridge the growing divide between Indians and the colonial administration. Initially, the Congress provided a space for progressive Indian elites and

functioned as a moderate forum advocating for reforms within the colonial framework rather than full independence, but over time, it transformed into a broad-based mass movement and ultimately became a central force in the struggle for Indian independence (Hill 2017).

In Indonesia, the Dutch East India Company reached the peak of its influence in the first half of the 18th century. A key turning point in its relationship with local communities was represented by the 1740 Batavia massacre, for which the company was responsible. The event exposed the Company's growing instability, corruption, and tough rule. By the late 1700s, the Company was deeply in debt and had lost much of its earlier commercial dominance. As a result, the Dutch government dissolved the Company in 1799, intending to assume direct control over Indonesia. The position of the Netherlands was relatively complicated in the early 1800s as the government inherited the Company's debts and administrative disarray while needing to fend off the British ambitions in the region amid the broader instability of the Napoleonic wars in Europe.

As a response to several crises, the Dutch government implemented a highly extractive governance model, known as the Cultivations System, from 1830 to 1870, which was designed to stabilize Dutch finances through forced agricultural production. One of the key requirements was that villagers had to allocate 20% (officially)—but oftentimes much more in practice—of their land to government-designated export crops. The system relied on Javanese elites as intermediaries, who enforced compliance through a mix of coercion and privilege retention. It proved so heavy-handed that the Dutch government decided to partly (but never fully) alleviate its policies. The Dutch also managed to expand inland and across more islands, even beyond what was previously controlled by the Dutch East India Company. In the mid-1800s, they started extending control beyond Java and establishing a more systematic presence in Sumatra, Bali, Sulawesi, and Borneo (Tarling 2003, 134–142).

The Philippines—the other major and previously established colony in Southeast Asia—experienced turbulent developments at the end of the 19th century when the colonial control over the country transitioned from Spain to the United States. The war between Spain and the United States broke out in 1898, largely due to US interests in Cuba, but it quickly spilled over to the Pacific. In the same year, the United States defeated the Spanish fleet and ended Spanish colonial rule. However, even before this war, the Philippine Revolution (1896–1898) sought to end Spanish rule. After the defeat of the Spanish, the revolution transformed into the Philippine-American War (1899–1902). While the war officially ended in 1902, local resistance continued for years in some areas of the Philippines (Aboitiz 2020; Ileto 2021). Nonetheless, it did not overturn the US rule, which lasted until 1946.

A new important trend of the 19th century was the extension of colonization to new parts of Southeast Asia, mainly driven by Great Britain and France. The British expanded to and gradually took control over the territories of Myanmar, previously

known as Burma, and Malaysia. The Anglo-Burmese Wars gradually led to the formal annexation of Burma into the British Empire (British India) in 1886. In Malaysia, the British initially established their presence in Penang, Malacca, and Singapore, which were incorporated into the so-called Straits Settlements (originally established in 1826) and placed under direct British rule in the 1860s. Throughout the rest of the 19th century, Britain began exerting control over other parts of Malaysia. Many of them were incorporated into the system of residency in which British officials advised local rulers, whose autonomy was limited. Others were autonomous but still experienced some British influence (Tarling 2003, 47–112).

France started its large-scale expansion to Southeast Asia in the mid-19th century. Besides being interested in new markets and natural resources, the French also wanted to balance Britain's growing power in the region. They mainly focused on what they called Indochina (Indo-Chine in French) and covered the territories of contemporary Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Using the pretext of protecting Catholic missionaries and commercial interests, France began military campaigns in this area in 1858. They initially acquired the southern parts of Vietnam, where their position continued to be strongest, but kept expanding their influence in northern Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The very majority of Indochina came under the effective control of France by the end of the 19th century, although the specific means and the level of direct rule varied in different areas and periods (Kocak 2007).

Siam, known today as Thailand, was the only Southeast Asian polity to maintain its independence amidst the intensified colonial expansion in the region. In the early 19th century, Siam was regionally dominant as it held influence over Laos, Cambodia, and parts of northern Malaysia. However, it experienced conflictual encounters with the British and French and was able to navigate this turbulent period by adopting a "buffer state" strategy to maintain its independence amid competing European interests. Many of Siam's kings and officials were highly educated and well-versed in European politics, which helped the country avoid direct colonization, although at the expense of various concessions and the acceptance of Siam's limited regional role (Mendiolaza, Rich, and Muraviev 2022). From the 1850s onwards, Siam signed a series of unequal treaties with Western powers, most notably the Bowring Treaty (1855) with Britain. It abolished Siam's royal monopoly over foreign trade, allowing British merchants to trade freely while lowering tariffs at the same time. The treaty also granted extraterritorial rights to British subjects, exempting them from local legal jurisdiction. Similar treaties with France, the United States, and other states followed in subsequent years (Horowitz 1985).

In East Asia, fundamental changes related to political organization arose in the mid-19th century. In China, critical changes took place during and in the aftermath of the so-called Opium Wars (1839–1842, 1856–1860). The overarching British objective was to gain access to the Chinese market, one of the largest markets with potential for colonial exploitation. France, the United States, and Russia also joined Britain in the Second Opium War. Both wars ended in China's defeat and

had wide-ranging implications for the country. Among them, China was compelled to relax trade restrictions and open additional treaty ports to foreign merchants. Moreover, following the First Opium War, China ceded Hong Kong Island to Britain, which later expanded its control to include Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories by 1898 under a 99-year lease. More broadly, these defeats marked a steep decline in the Qing dynasty's domestic authority and international standing. This period was characterized by internal rebellions, social unrest, and the growing intrusion of Western states and, eventually, Japan. Although China was never fully colonized in the traditional sense, it entered a semi-colonial or semi-feudal status in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century, a period remembered in China as the "Century of Humiliation" (Wang 2014). It was an era of turbulent developments, marked by efforts to adopt Western technologies, modernize institutions, and rethink the philosophical foundations of the Chinese state and society. Despite these efforts, the Qing dynasty ultimately failed to restore the empire's strength (Harrison 2001). These mounting pressures culminated in the 1911 Revolution, which overthrew imperial rule and established the Republic of China.

Throughout much of the colonial era, Japan pursued an isolationist foreign policy called *sakoku*, which was adopted in the early 17th century at the beginning of the Edo period (also known as the period of the Tokugawa shogunate). This policy limited Japan's political relations and trade with other actors, including Westerners. It was ended by two US expeditions led by Matthew Perry in the 1850s, which, under threat of force, resulted in Japan opening to trade. These voyages were motivated by the US's effort to find new markets in Asia and to secure ports en route to China. These goals were achieved and confirmed by signing the Treaty of Kanagawa between the United States and Japan in 1854. Perry's success encouraged Britain, Russia, France, and the Netherlands to impose their own treaties upon Japan, often through a similar combination of pressure and displays of military force (so-called gunboat diplomacy). Like in the case of China, these treaties were unequal, favoring Western powers and undermining Japan's power and authority. They also created conditions for an influx of foreign goods, technologies, and ideas.

In this context, Japan experienced an internal upheaval. While Japanese society tried to deal with "barbarians" (Westerners) and revive domestic power, it split into two main opposing political factions. On one side were representatives or loyalists of the shogunate (military government), and on the other, supporters of the emperor, most notably from the far-from-Tokyo provinces of Satsuma, Choshu, and Tosa, who had only limited power during the Tokugawa era, but increasingly influential in its later days. Internal tensions and pressures led to a civil war and, subsequently, the so-called Meiji Restoration—a re-establishment of imperial power in 1868 under Emperor Meiji, who reigned until 1912. During this period, Japan started to follow the Western model of modernization and industrialization, quickly strengthening its political and economic position and emerging as a great power in the newly formed global international system (Wittner 2007).

Japan's rapid transformation was accompanied by new international ambitions. One of the first steps was to secure a dominant position in East Asia. As such, Japan focused on China and Korea. The latter was highly influenced by China and acted as a tributary state of the Chinese empire for centuries. The First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) was primarily fought over influence in Korea. It could be understood as the beginning of Japanese expansionism, which was inspired by the then-dominant norm of Western colonial imperialism (Suzuki 2009). The war ended with China's defeat, and besides increasing its influence in Korea, Japan also acquired Taiwan as its first major colony. What followed were further conflicts in the region. Between 1904 and 1905, Japan defeated Russia in a mutual conflict. In 1905, Japan established Korea as its protectorate, and by 1910, it had formally annexed the peninsula. This marked the end of Korea's long-standing orientation toward China and the beginning of a period of harsh Japanese rule.

At the same time, however, Japan grew increasingly frustrated by its perceived insufficient recognition from the West (Suzuki 2009). After the Russo-Japanese War as well as World War I, Japan, despite being a victorious state in both conflicts, felt sidelined in international affairs and excluded from the "club" of great powers. This frustration was apparent at the Washington Naval Conference of 1921–1922, where Japanese diplomats failed to secure agreements on par with those of their European counterparts. Similarly, Japan was disappointed by the continuing racial discrimination it faced in Europe and the United States.

The combination of these disillusions, Japan's expanding international ambitions, and the economic hardships of the Great Depression fueled the gradual rise of Japanese ultranationalism, drawing inspiration from Western fascism. This shift marked Tokyo's full recognition of imperialism as a legitimate foreign policy tool and the beginning of Japan's colonial expansion in East and Southeast Asia. Japan increased its penetration of China and created Manchukuo, a puppet state in Manchuria (northern China, 1932–1945) under its control. Ongoing tensions with China led to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), which is sometimes understood as the beginning of World War II in Asia. To increase its regional influence and boost the economy, Japan established the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. It was officially announced in 1940, but there had been similar initiatives and ideas in the late 1930s. Japan presented itself as the leader and protector of Asia, largely building upon pan-Asianist ideas (see Chapter 1). However, in practice, the Sphere was a tool for Japan's domination. In the early 1940s, Japan quickly expanded into Southeast Asia. As a result, much of the region came under Japanese influence, including the territories of present-day Korea, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Indonesia (Yellen 2023). Japan's imperial project ultimately came to an end with its defeat in 1945.

An overview of colonization in the Indo-Pacific, including a summary of major territories controlled by colonizers and the type of rule they adopted, is provided in Table 2.1.

TABLE 2.1 Summary of colonial possessions and governance approaches.

Colonial power	*Major colonial territories*	*Type of rule*
France	Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos (gradually from the 1860s until 1954)	Direct rule in southern Vietnam Protectorates with high French influence in central and northern Vietnam Protectorate with strong supervision in Cambodia Protectorate and looser control in Laos
Great Britain	British India, including Pakistan and Bangladesh (mid-18th century–1947)	East India Company rule (mid-18th century-1858) British Crown rule (1858–1945)—mixture of direct and indirect rule (indirect over semi-independent princely states)
	Sri Lanka (1796–1948)	Direct rule
	Myanmar (formerly Burma) (gradually since the 1820s until 1948)	Part of British India (1886–1937), then direct rule
	Malaysia (19th century–1957)	Mixture of direct and indirect, gradually leaning toward direct rule
Japan	Taiwan (1895–1945)	Direct rule
	Korea (1905–1945)	Protectorate (1905–1910), then annexed and part of the Japanese empire (1910–1945)
	Manchuria (1931–1945)	Puppet state (Manchukuo), formally independent, close direct control in practice
	Parts of China, most of Southeast Asia (during World War II)	Mixture of direct and indirect rule, strong military oversight in practice
Netherlands	Indonesia (early 17th century-1949)	East India Company rule (early 17th century–1799)—presence especially in Java Direct rule (1799–1949)—gradual expansion across the whole Indonesian territory
Portugal	Smaller strategic outposts across the region (especially, Goa and Macao)	Mostly direct rule
	Timor-Leste (East Timor) (1702–1975)	Mixture of direct and indirect rule (also depending on the specific time period)
Spain	Philippines (mid-16th century–1898)	Direct rule
United States	Philippines (1898–1946)	Direct rule

Source: Created by authors.

Decolonization

After centuries of the consolidation of colonial power, decolonization marked a pivotal realignment of global power and political organization. In the Indo-Pacific as well as in some other regions across the world, the key phase of decolonization took place shortly after World War II. As a result of the war, many colonial powers were exhausted (e.g., the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands) or directly defeated (especially Japan in the context of the Indo-Pacific). Alongside that, the norm and practice of colonialism became gradually delegitimized and widely challenged from a moral point of view (Clark 2005; Umar 2019, 181–89; Crawford 2002). The process of post–World War II decolonization was also intertwined with the emergence of the global Cold War confrontation in many cases, which only accentuated the importance of ongoing shifts in international politics.

However, framing decolonization exclusively through the lens of post–World War II dynamics and attributing its causes solely to the weakening of colonial powers presents a highly restricted analytical perspective. In fact, several polities experienced decolonization much later. Many of these were former Portuguese colonies, including Timor-Leste (under Portuguese control until 1975, and then occupied by Indonesia until 1999), Goa (annexed by India in 1961), and Macao (returned to China in 1999). Britain returned Hong Kong to China only in 1997. France handed over some of its smaller enclaves in South Asia to India in the 1950s, with the final legal transfer completed by treaty in the 1960s. More importantly, decolonization was driven not just by geopolitical shifts, but by sustained anti-colonial resistance from local societies. In the Indo-Pacific, opposition to colonial domination was continuous and multifaceted (cf. Sianipar et al. 2024). In Indochina, for instance, resistance to French rule—especially in Vietnam—began early and persisted throughout the colonial period. Likewise, waves of both violent and non-violent resistance emerged across the region, reflecting the agency and determination of colonized populations to reclaim autonomy and shape their own futures.

As indicated in the preceding section, there were large-scale uprisings against colonizers long before World War II. The Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the Philippine Revolution (1896–1898) are prime examples of that. The latter was the first major nationalist uprising in Southeast Asia and was inspired by Enlightenment liberalism, nationalism, anti-clericalism, revolutionary romanticism, and local cultural influences. It was started by the revolutionary secret society Katipunan. Although tensions between "Ilustrado" moderates (a moderate educated class) and Katipunan radicals quickly emerged, the revolution effort mobilized local intellectual elites as well as rural masses when seeking independence from Spain. As such, the revolution was also one of the key events in the rise of modern Filipino nationalism, political mobilization, and the rise of mass politics (Aguilar 2020; Valila 2024; Wirth 2023). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, similar tendencies and dynamics appeared across many countries in the Indo-Pacific. This period is characterized by the arrival and dissemination of ideologies of progress from Europe—most typically,

liberalism and socialism (see Chapter 1 for a closer discussion)—and their combination with local political and social influences, the emerging nationalism, and anti-colonialism. Within this intellectual environment, new moderate as well as radical social movements and political parties started to mobilize large-scale public support to challenge colonial rule (Harper 2022; Six 2020).

The main wave of decolonization took place shortly after World War II and took different (violent as well as non-violent) forms. In South Asia, the United Kingdom relinquished its colonial holdings reluctantly, though largely without armed conflict. British withdrawal was preceded and compelled by sustained local anti-colonial efforts. These were spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi's campaign of non-violent civil disobedience and Jawaharlal Nehru's diplomatic activities during the 1930s and 1940s, with the Quit India Movement (1942–1945) playing a pivotal role in expressing Indian demands for independence. Simultaneously, the Muslim League began advocating for a separate Muslim state based on the two-nation theory (Khan, Khan, and Mobashir 2023), which eventually led to the partition of British India and the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947. However, independence was accompanied by the first Indo-Pakistani war over Kashmir and continued political tensions between the two states (Ganguly et al. 2019). It is also important to note that the partition resulted in brutal sectarian violence, ethnic tensions, and the mass displacement of millions. The British also withdrew from Sri Lanka and renounced their indirect influence over Nepal and Bhutan, though their involvement in Bhutan had always been limited (cf. Phuntsho 2015). Another independent state in South Asia—Bangladesh—was created in 1971. During partition, the territory of contemporary Bangladesh was incorporated into Pakistan based on religious affiliation. However, significant political, cultural, and geographic differences existed between East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (now Pakistan). These tensions culminated in a declaration of independence by Bangladesh in 1971, followed by a brutal conflict with Pakistan. Bangladesh's independence was secured largely due to decisive support from India (Haider 2009).

In Southeast Asia, the first precondition for decolonization was the defeat of Japanese imperialism, which stretched across much of the region during World War II. The withdrawal of Japan from territories occupied by it represented a window of opportunity for local actors seeking sovereignty. The Philippines achieved independence from the United States relatively easily and shortly after the end of the war (1946), but the European powers did not intend to give up their colonies. In Indonesia, Sukarno—a leading figure in Indonesian politics and anti-colonial struggle—proclaimed independence in 1945 following Japan's defeat. However, the Dutch returned to reimpose control, which led to a protracted conflict (1945–1949). The Netherlands formally recognized Indonesian independence in 1949, and the following year was understood as a landmark for the internal unification of Indonesia (Luttikhuis and Moses 2012).

Likewise, Britain aspired to re-establish their colonial control in Southeast Asia. In Burma (Myanmar), local nationalists demanded complete independence, and

their main leader, Aung San, managed to negotiate an independence agreement with the United Kingdom. He was assassinated in 1947 along with most of his cabinet, which complicated the situation; nevertheless, the country achieved independence in 1948 (cf. Aung 2019). The political trajectory was largely different in the case of Malaysia, where the Malayan Communist Party launched a guerrilla insurgency against the British and clashed with Malay elites. In light of rising communist influence, the British launched a large-scale counterinsurgency campaign known as the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), deliberately avoiding the term "war" to prevent insurers from invalidating colonial policies (Hack 2009). The conflict was marked by efforts to suppress the communist-led insurgency of the Malayan National Liberation Army, largely composed of ethnic Chinese fighters. Following years of unrest and political reform, the Federation of Malaya—comprising eleven states in what is now Peninsular Malaysia—gained independence in 1957. The federation did not initially include Singapore, Sabah, or Sarawak. These territories later joined to form the new state of Malaysia in 1963. However, due to political and ethnic tensions, Singapore was expelled from the federation in 1965 and has remained an independent republic ever since (Barr 2019).

France also attempted to reclaim control over the colony of Indochina. However, the collapse of Japanese control of this area allowed local nationalist forces to assert independence. The Viet Minh, a communist independence movement under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, was particularly important in this context. The whole situation led to the First Indochina War (1946–1954) and culminated in the key battle at Dien Bien Phu and the subsequent Geneva Conference (1954), which temporarily divided Vietnam (Cable 2000).

In some cases, local anti-colonial struggles were further complicated by Cold War dynamics. Vietnam is a prime example. The Second Indochina War, also known as the Vietnam War (1955–1975), erupted soon after the Geneva Accords, which followed the First Indochina War. It took place primarily in Vietnam, but also involved Laos and Cambodia. At the heart of the conflict was the tension between North Vietnam, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communist Party, and South Vietnam, marked by a combination of anti-communist, republican, and authoritarian tendencies. While North Vietnam was supported by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, the United States intervened in the war, assisting South Vietnam. Following prolonged conflict and the eventual withdrawal of US forces, Vietnam was unified under communist leadership in 1975 (Moyar 2006). Similarly, Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945 quickly turned into a Cold War confrontation. The United States and the Soviet Union split the peninsula, setting up two separate regimes—the pro-US Republic of Korea in the south and the communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north. This situation led to the Korean War (1950–1953), one of the most important conflicts in the early Cold War period. Although an armistice was signed in 1953, the Korean peninsula has remained divided to this day (Sandler 1999).

The situation in China also evinced some similarities to the aforementioned cases. After the fall of the Qing dynasty, the Republic of China was established in 1912. Although China was not fully colonized, the new republic experienced a wide variety of challenges, including foreign encroachment, ongoing confrontations with Japan, and internal conflict—mostly notably the civil war between the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party, also spelled Guomindang) and the Communist Party of China (Mitter 2005). After the end of World War II, China's situation improved in some respects. The Japanese were expelled, and the Chinese government regained control over the so-called treaty ports, where Western powers and Japan had previously enjoyed significant privileges. However, the civil war soon resumed, culminating in the victory of the Chinese Communist Party and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The Kuomintang government retreated to Taiwan, where it maintained the republican regime, which continues to exist today. Limited military clashes between the two sides took place in the 1950s, shaping the early Cold War dynamics in East Asia (Christensen 1996).

Modern Sovereign States in Post-colonial Conditions

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the defining features of the modern states and modern sovereignty include a clear-cut distinction between inside and outside, the presence of one definitive political authority and a monopoly of the (legitimate) use of force in the domestic environment, and formally equal relations between such sovereign authorities in the international context. In the period of colonization, all of these characteristics were either compromised or directly contradicted. For example, British India was ruled by the representatives of a foreign power (the British Crown). At the same time, Britain exerted significant influence over the semi-autonomous princely states of South Asia. These states' sovereignty was compromised by the presence of British political agents and their loss of independent foreign policy control. As such, ultimate political authority was either unclear or located outside (rather than inside) given states. Additionally, the notion of equality among states was undermined by the supremacy of colonial empires, which enjoyed extensive legal and practical privileges over their colonies (cf. Anghie 2005; Benton 2009). Even non-colonized countries like China and Siam (Thailand) were forced to make a variety of concessions, including granting extraterritorial rights to Western citizens. In contrast, Japan, after consolidating power in the late 19th century, quickly adopted its own imperialist policies and colonized other Asian territories.

Hence, the rise of modern states in the Indo-Pacific was largely enabled by the process of decolonization, with most modern sovereign states emerging in the 20th century, especially after World War II. Throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, states in the Indo-Pacific—both during their colonial periods and following independence—developed increasingly robust bureaucratic systems and

governmental frameworks that consolidated domestic authority. A notable early example is Japan during the Meiji reforms, a period of profound state-led transformation marked by the establishment of a centralized political organization, a conscripted national military and a professional police force. Other states subsequently adopted comparable measures and reforms. However, as this section shows, there are some continuities between the colonial and imperial periods, and the post–World War II processes of state-building (for similar perspectives, cf. e.g. Abraham 2014; Callahan 2004; Gregory 2004; Karmazin 2023; Mishra 2021). More specifically, we argue that understanding the prevailing political organization in the Indo-Pacific requires framing modern states within post-colonial and post-imperial contexts.

One of the most apparent impacts of previous political dynamics is that the basic territorial contours and state structures of many present-day Indo-Pacific countries were defined through processes of colonization and decolonization. Some contemporary states did not even exist in their current shape prior to colonization—this is particularly true in Southeast Asia. For example, before European colonization, the area now known as Malaysia consisted of several independent and semi-independent sultanates and kingdoms. The Philippines was politically, ethnically, and culturally diverse prior to Spanish colonization in the 16th century. Perhaps most notably, the territory now known as Indonesia—the largest state in Southeast Asia—was historically fragmented and might never have emerged in its present form without the gradual unification imposed by Dutch colonial rule. In many cases, the form decolonization took was strongly influenced by the strategic decisions of Western powers. The creation of two successor states from British Raj—India and Pakistan—was opposed by the majority of Indian elites but ultimately supported by the British. Similarly, the division of the Korean Peninsula resulted from a combination of Japanese decolonization and emerging Cold War rivalries between the United States and the Soviet Union.

While these matters have been touched on in the chapter, we now turn to a deeper exploration of the emergence of modern states under post-colonial and post-imperial conditions. This will be done through three focal points: First, the importance of state sovereignty for Indo-Pacific states in the post–World War II context; second, the organizational characteristics of the modern state blended with post-colonial and post-imperial features; and third, the enduring impact of post-colonial and historical legacies in contemporary Indo-Pacific politics.

The Attractiveness of State Sovereignty

The majority of governments in the Indo-Pacific in the post–World War II period proclaimed themselves to be staunch advocates of the conventional (conservative, Westphalian) understanding of sovereignty. This interpretation emphasizes the inviolability of territorial integrity and a rejection of external interference in domestic affairs. This view has been repeatedly defended in the rhetoric of major regional

powers like China (Contessi 2010; Kim 1998) and India (Bajpai 2003; Ganguly 2001), as well as among most Southeast Asian states and ASEAN as the overarching international organization in this region (Beeson 2003; Ginsburg 2005). Smaller states in South Asia, like Bhutan (Phuntsho 2015, 572–583) and Nepal (Bastola 2025), have also embraced this view.

Although the actual character of statehood in the region is more complicated in practice, this strong rhetorical commitment to Westphalian sovereignty is notable. Its enduring appeal can be largely traced back to the colonial experiences of the region. This is documented by Manjari Chatterjee Miller's extensive analysis of debates at the United Nations General Assembly, which shows that previously colonized countries have developed a distinct ideological orientation compared to other states (Chatterjee Miller 2013, especially 35–54). This position is characterized by the noticeable, sustained, and much higher emphasis placed on international recognition of their independence, status, and the historical injustices they endured under colonization, combined with maximizing territorial sovereignty and its protection. Other scholars have similarly noted that previously colonized states emphasize territorial sovereignty precisely because their statehood has historically been undermined, and their existence as independent polities cannot be taken for granted (Ayoob 1995; Grovogui 2002; Jackson 1993). Ayoob, in particular, describes this as a "security-sovereignty predicament," where the primary interest is to secure a stable and viable state-building process along with their very existence (Ayoob 1995).

Notably, the formation and preservation of a modern sovereign state has long been a key goal for political actors and social movements across the ideological spectrum—during the colonial period and beyond. There were partial exceptions, such as Mahatma Gandhi, who despite striving for India's independence, was wary of building a strong modern state with a robust governance apparatus (Bajpai 2003). However, almost all national liberation movements and reformers viewed national sovereignty as essential. Whether socialist, liberal, nationalist, or conservative, they saw the sovereign state as the primary vehicle for decolonization and political transformation. Even communists like Mao Zedong or Ho Chi Minh, who ultimately envisioned a stateless, egalitarian future, recognized the strategic importance of national sovereignty as a necessary step in the post-colonial transition (An 2013). The 1955 Bandung Conference, a landmark moment of post-colonial diplomacy, exemplified this dual commitment. While the conference promoted a form of internationalism rooted in solidarity among Asian and African states, it also underscored sovereignty as a necessary precondition for a just and equitable global order (Chatterjee 2016). Much more recently, this sovereignty-centered discourse has been adopted by a new generation of Asian conservative populists like Narendra Modi in India (Quamar 2024), Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia (Rusli, Widjojanto, and Bahar 2025), or Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand (Phongpaichit 2004), who have often positioned sovereignty as central to national pride and political legitimacy.

Hybrid Sovereignty: Colonial and Imperial Influences and the Modern States

Although the idea of sovereignty has been widely cherished across the Indo-Pacific, the actual organization of states in the region does not always conform neatly to the ideal typical model of modern Westphalian sovereignty. While this model serves as a normative and institutional baseline, in practice it often blends with colonial and imperial influences (for a deeper analysis, see Karmazin 2023).

China, in many respects, represents a textbook case of Westphalian sovereignty. However, this characterization becomes less precise when considering the special status of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. Hong Kong and Macao are connected to the Chinese state through unique, highly autonomous arrangements, while Taiwan operates as a de facto independent state, despite lacking formal diplomatic recognition. A new and distinct approach to these three polities started to form during the reform period under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. During that time, Hong Kong was under British colonial control and Macao was under Portuguese colonial control, whereas Taiwan has long been viewed by Chinese authorities as a separatist province, which legitimately belongs to China. To administer these territories in the future, the Chinese leadership developed a model widely known as "One Country, Two Systems," which was put into practice when China gained control over Hong Kong in 1997 and Macao in 1999. Chinese authorities have also proposed Taiwan's integration with the mainland under a framework similar to that applied in the cases of Hong Kong and Macao (Li 2020; MOFA PRC n.d.). However, Taiwan has consistently rejected incorporation into the People's Republic of China under any such framework.

Deng's approach was underpinned by two core motivations. First was the "peace and development" discourse, which promoted flexibility and openness, positioning the reabsorption of economically advanced territories as essential for national modernization. Second was a nationalist narrative of recovering sovereignty lost to colonial incursions—a project framed as restoring China's historical dignity that cannot be compromised. To reconcile these narratives, Chinese political thought adopted a functional distinction between the right to govern (de facto sovereignty) and formal sovereignty (Tok 2013). While Chinese representatives suggested that local authorities (of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan) can potentially enjoy a full right to rule, formal sovereignty over these territories was intended to be completely in the hands of the People's Republic of China. This enabled flexibility in administration while preserving China's symbolic and legal claims to authority. The result was a political framework in which sovereign prerogatives and responsibilities in individual policy areas can be shared or functionally divided between mainland China and its central government on the one hand, and these autonomous units on the other, echoing the hierarchical and differentiated governance structures of the traditional Sino-centric order (cf. Ringmar 2012, 13).

To provide a more specific illustration, it is useful to look at how Hong Kong's position was defined after the handover from Britain to China, while a very similar arrangement was also prepared and used for Macao after its return from the Portuguese administration. Hong Kong was designated a Special Administrative Region with a distinct constitutional framework—the Basic Law (2021)—that preserved its political and legal systems modeled on British colonial governance. Moreover, Hong Kong was allowed to retain a quasi-independent international agency. To demarcate it, "foreign relations" and "external relations" were distinguished, which resembles the distinction between formal (de jure) and de facto sovereignty as well as a similar differentiation advanced by the British during their colonial rule over Hong Kong. While Hong Kong was not allowed to have an independent foreign policy (no official diplomatic relations with other countries), it could—and actively did—engage in external relations. For example, it participated in international organizations with an economic, cultural, or technical focus as an actor separate from China. Moreover, although Chinese officials have consistently defined Hong Kong as an inalienable part of China, mainland China and Hong Kong are separated by a de facto international border, complete with immigration checks, differing visa regimes, and separate currencies (Karmazin 2023, 97–123).

Hong Kong's position has been undergoing some significant changes, especially since 2020. While many of the characteristics described above remain, it is apparent that the Chinese central government intends to limit Hong Kong's autonomy, and the model of One Country, Two Systems has been weakened (Pei 2020). Despite this—and despite the even more complex situation regarding Taiwan, whose authorities have never accepted subordination to the People's Republic of China—the organization of statehood in China displays several features that do not fit the conventional understanding of modern (Westphalian) sovereignty and bear the imprint of colonial and imperial legacies.

India presents a similarly complex case. After independence in 1947, the multilayered system of the British Raj, which involved a mixture of direct and indirect rule and buffer zones in the frontier areas of the Raj, was transformed into a unified sovereign state. However, remnants of imperial arrangements persisted, particularly in India's early external relations. One of the key indications of this continuity was the signing of international treaties with Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim, which were closely modeled upon the previously existing agreements between these territories and the British during the colonial era (Dutt 1981; Nayak 2010; Rahul 1976). These treaties limited foreign or defense policies of these three states, and practically replicated the British logic of establishing protectorates along the Indian borders. Sikkim's international status was highly ambiguous. It held a special protectorate status until its full integration into India in 1975. In contrast, Nepal soon achieved full independence from India and could not be meaningfully regarded as an Indian protectorate. Bhutan's position is arguably the most interesting and stands out, especially for its longevity.

According to the Indo-Bhutanese treaty of 1949, India is "to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan. On its part the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations." Moreover, India gained some oversight of Bhutanese imports of arms and warlike material (Treaty of Friendship between India and Bhutan 1949). Jawaharlal Nehru—the leader of India between 1947 and 1964—pointed out during a crucial diplomatic trip to Bhutan in 1958 that "Bhutan must be internally independent and that we, much less any other country, should exercise no pressure on it, [but] it was obvious that Bhutan could not be independent in the external or international sense of the word" (Nehru 2012, 318). India closely assisted Bhutan in many respects during the following decades. It helped Bhutan develop its Ministry of Foreign Affairs and sponsored Bhutan's membership in international organizations, including the UN, of which Bhutan became a member in 1971. The 2007 treaty revision formally removed the clause about Indian guidance over Bhutan's foreign relations (India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty 2007), but close cooperation remains, as demonstrated during India's involvement in the 2017 military standoff over the Sino-Bhutanese border (Mitra and Thaliyakkattil 2018).

Internally, India has also contained territories with special statuses—Kashmir being perhaps the most prominent example of them. The region of Kashmir was divided between India and Pakistan after a war that erupted shortly after both countries achieved independence. Indian-administered Kashmir held a unique and highly autonomous position within the Indian statehood framework for much of its post-1947 history, defined by a combination of exceptional constitutional provisions. Upon its accession to India, Kashmir was granted special status by the Indian Constitution. According to this arrangement, the state of Jammu and Kashmir was entitled to maintain its own constitution, a separate flag, and significant internal autonomy—retaining all powers except in defense, foreign affairs, and communications, which were reserved for the Indian central government. However, this distinctive governance model was always characterized by the central government's intrusion, with New Delhi periodically deploying (often extra-legal) measures to assert influence (Behera 2016; Hussain 2021). In 2019, this configuration was drastically changed when the Indian government revoked constitutional provisions defining Kashmir's autonomy, dissolved the state, and reorganized it into two union territories under closer control of the central government (Shah and Shah 2020).

Beyond China and India, other examples in the Indo-Pacific highlight arrangements that deviate from Westphalian norms. For instance, the Wa State is a de facto independent, self-governing region in Myanmar, composed of two separate territories—a northern part at the Chinese border and a southern part at the Thai border, which used to have an ambiguous demarcation during the imperial and colonial periods. It is governed by the United Wa State Army, which was formed in 1989. Although it does not demand international independence from

Myanmar, it largely positions itself as a state within a state and distinct from the rest of Myanmar. As such, it does not accept interference from the central government. The United Wa State Army practically managed to achieve its independence within Myanmar to a large extent, and the Wa State's autonomy was even partly recognized by the central Burmese government (Steinmüller 2020). Analogous patterns can also be found in the cases of the Bangsamoro region in the Philippines or West Papua and Aceh in Indonesia, further underscoring the region's diverse and layered practices of sovereignty.

Historical Legacies and Contemporary Politics

Besides the organizational form of statehood, colonial and imperial legacies have also influenced other political characteristics, processes, and debates essential to state-building and nation-building in the Indo-Pacific. These influences are particularly evident in three areas: Territorial conflicts, political systems, and memory politics.

First, many contemporary territorial conflicts are rooted in the colonial, decolonial, and imperial dynamics that once shaped the geopolitical landscape. Colonial powers, particularly the British, often pursued strategies of buffer zones and informal control, resulting in ambiguous and contested borders. This legacy is evident in the China–India border disputes and in India's smaller territorial disagreements with Nepal—most notably over Kalapani and Susta. These conflicts stem primarily from the ambiguous borders (or rather frontiers) established during British colonial rule and diverging contemporary interpretations of historical treaties and maps (Aryal and Pulami 2024; Ranjan 2016). Similar patterns are visible elsewhere. The disputes between Japan and Russia over the Kuril Islands (known as the Northern Territories dispute in Japan), between Japan and South Korea over the islands known as Dokdo (in Korea), Takeshima (in Japan), or the Liancourt Rocks; and between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear Temple (now resolved), also reflect imperial legacies that continue to complicate efforts to achieve territorial integrity. More details on security dynamics, including territorial conflicts, are provided in Chapter 3.

Second, the institutional designs of many Indo-Pacific political systems reflect the imprint of their former colonial rulers. This is especially noticeable in former British colonies—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia—which bear resemblances to Great Britain's "Westminster-style" political systems. The constitutions of these countries were inspired by or modeled upon the British constitution. More specifically, these resemblances lie in the adoption of federalism, the first-past-the-post electoral method, a prime minister-led executive, and the principle that executive authority originates from and is dependent on parliament. Nonetheless, it needs to be noted these South and Southeast Asian countries also have specifics and distinct characteristics, such as periods of strong military influence in Bangladesh and Pakistan, a strong presidential role in Sri Lanka, relatively

distinct forms of federalism, for example, in India, or a weak parliamentary oversight in Malaysia (Oberst 2018). In the Philippines, the adoption of presidentialism and the separation of powers was influenced by the US model. However, the practical functioning of these principles differs due to the prevalence of political dynasties, patronage politics, and a weaker party system (Ufen 2008). Japan's political system was highly influenced by the US occupation in the aftermath of World War II (1945–1952), with its 1947 constitution written by US lawyers (Samuels 2008). Elsewhere, colonial influences are subtler but still present—for example, Indonesia and Vietnam utilized a centralized bureaucratic system developed in the colonial era, although their political systems otherwise diverged from those of their former colonizers.

Third, colonial experiences have deeply shaped the collective memory and national identity across Indo-Pacific societies. This influence manifests in at least two principal forms. The first one concerns the widespread emergence of negative sentiments toward colonization, which continue to shape national identities and the foreign policy orientations of regional actors until today. Even those states that were never fully colonized developed a strong sense of national humiliation as a result of engagements with colonial powers. China and Thailand are the key examples in this regard. Although Thai nationalism celebrates that the country was never colonized, many Thai actors criticize Western colonialism and accuse it of having robbed Thailand lands. Thai historians often assert that the country navigated the Western-dominated world more adeptly than other Southeast Asian kingdoms, which is a source of national pride for many. At the same time, however, numerous Thai leaders approach the West with suspicion. This reveals a complex and ambivalent dynamic in Thailand's relationship with the West (Strate 2015). The discourse of national humiliation works in a very similar way in China. Some scholars have highlighted its deeply ambivalent nature, or even called it "pessoptimist" (Callahan 2010). The discourse blames the Western colonial powers and Japan for the numerous hardships China had to go through and it constantly revives memories of being wronged, while it also imagines a way to overcome these negative experiences and become a strong and respected country. This discourse plays a central role in shaping China's foreign policy, frequently prompting rigorous defense of national interests or confrontational approaches when Chinese officials perceive those interests to be at risk (Callahan 2010; Wang 2014).

Thailand and China are no exceptions in the way historical colonial experiences inform contemporary nationalism, although specific manifestations might be different. In South Korea, deep-seated resentment toward Japanese colonization remains a core element of the nation's post–World War II identity. This historical grievance continues to inform the attitudes of some social and political actors, leading them to adopt a cautious or distrustful stance in their foreign policy toward Japan (Moon and Li 2010). In Vietnam, resentment persists toward both the era of French colonialism and earlier episodes of Chinese interference, with Vietnamese nationalism often portraying the nation's past as a 2,000-year-long

struggle against foreign intrusion (Nguyen 2019). In India, there is a long-term critique of British rule and various negative effects it had on the country, and similar criticism of colonialism can be found elsewhere in the region (cf. Chatterjee 1986).

There is another connection between colonialism and nation-building, although it may at the same time be complementary to the previous examples. It concerns the ways in which dominant (mainstream or official) historical narratives in the respective countries construct the ideas of national unity and historical (dis-) continuity. Various scholars highlight that mainstream or official historiographies tend to portray achieving independence as a rupture or clean break from colonial rule (Bogaerts and Raben 2012; Heryanto 2018). These historiographies, they argue, often mask uncomfortable continuities—such as institutional legacies, class stratifications, and elite collaborations with colonial regimes—that persist into the post-colonial period. Such narratives also often work with a "rebirth" of the nation after independence and its return to the previously existing trajectory of authentic national history. This is particularly noticeable in Indonesia, where the nation-building process has long utilized exclusionary ethno-nationalism and the myth of an "authentic Indonesian identity." However, this perspective has only been enabled by sidelining the pluralistic and transnational history of Indonesia, which did not really exist as a unified and coherent nation before colonization (Heryanto 2018).

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to offer a comprehensive exploration of colonization, decolonization, and the rise of the modern sovereign state in the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific region's transformation under the twin forces of colonization and decolonization is pivotal for understanding the contemporary character of the region as well as for the process of state formation in the region. The effects of colonization proved to be long-lasting as it imposed new systems of governance, redrew territorial boundaries, dismantled indigenous systems of rule, embedded administrative apparatuses that would later be inherited by post-colonial states, stimulated the emergence of nationalist and anti-colonial movements, and influenced national identities of contemporary states in the Indo-Pacific. In this sense, to fully grasp the nature of statehood, state-building, and nation-building in the region since the mid-20th century, we must view Indo-Pacific states as existing under post-colonial and post-imperial conditions.

As demonstrated, European colonizers utilized different mechanisms of control—ranging from direct to indirect rule—tailored to their interests and strategic calculations. Before the 19th century, the East India Companies played a significant role, especially in the colonization of India and Indonesia, blending commercial motives with quasi-sovereign powers such as minting currency and waging war. Colonial powers also differed in how extractive they were and what

style of oversight they preferred. The rule of the East India Companies in India and Indonesia primarily followed the economic logic of making a profit. However, after the Company handed over rule in India to the British state, the British adopted a comparatively more inclusive approach and, among other things, enabled limited incorporation of Indians into governmental structures. In contrast, the Dutch rule in Indonesia was extremely extractive and heavy-handed after the fall of their East India Company. Paths to independence also varied. Societies in the Indo-Pacific employed different strategies to achieve self-rule, while colonial powers adopted divergent approaches to decolonization. While the United States and the United Kingdom were more inclined to relinquish control through negotiated transitions, the Netherlands and France were more reluctant, often resorting to military force to maintain their colonial possessions.

Decolonization in the 20th century enabled the emergence of modern sovereign states in the region, but their borders and political structures were often products of colonial decisions. The ideal of Westphalian sovereignty—based on territorial integrity and non-interference—became especially attractive to post-colonial states, due to their experiences of compromised autonomy. However, the reality of statehood in the Indo-Pacific remains complex. Contemporary statehood in the region is best understood as hybrid: Shaped simultaneously by post-colonial aspirations and enduring colonial and imperial legacies.

In this sense, the legacy of colonization is not simply a matter of history; rather, it is still alive. Consequently, understanding the Indo-Pacific's political evolution requires an appreciation of the complex interplay between indigenous traditions, previous colonial interventions, and post-colonial transformations. In this interplay, regional states were not merely passive recipients of external models but active agents who adapted, resisted, and reinterpreted these influences to craft new forms of political identity and legitimacy. As the Indo-Pacific continues to rise in global importance, the historical processes traced in this chapter remain important not only for interpreting regional developments but also for understanding and influencing the evolving global order.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What were the key differences in how European colonial powers (e.g., Britain, France, the Netherlands) governed their territories in the Indo-Pacific?
- Could states like Indonesia, India, or the Philippines have formed in their current territorial shapes without colonial intervention?
- The chapter presents both internal (local resistance) and external (global power shifts) factors in decolonization. Which do you think was more decisive in the Indo-Pacific's case, and why?

- Does decolonization represent a clear rupture from colonial governance, or are there more continuities than commonly acknowledged? Provide examples to support your view.
- To what extent do current political systems and political institutions in the Indo-Pacific reflect colonial governance structures?
- Can you identify examples of anti-colonial struggle in the Indo-Pacific? How can we distinguish different types of them?
- How can we distinguish between the ideal-typical model of Westphalian sovereignty and the actual practices of sovereignty in the Indo-Pacific?
- How can we understand the notion of hybrid sovereignty? Can you provide any specific illustrations?
- How does colonial history influence contemporary nationalism and foreign policy in countries like China, Vietnam, or Thailand?
- Can you identify any ongoing disputes and demonstrate how they were shaped by colonial history?

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