

Thailand's Kra Isthmus and Elusive Canal Plans since the 1850s

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Abstract

This article uses primarily British colonial documents and Singapore sources to examine the history of proposals for the construction of a shipping canal through Thailand's Kra Isthmus from the 1850s. It provides historical background for continuing interest in constructing a Kra canal with the most recent speculative discussions involving Chinese interests. Since the 1850s the idea of a canal was revived on numerous occasions with several detailed surveys conducted over this time to assess the feasibility of a shipping canal via the Kra Isthmus. This research examines how speculation and actual proposals were handled by the British colonial authorities and how this related to the British policy of using Siam/Thailand as a buffer state separating their colonies and those of their European rival France. In colonial Singapore canal proposals created great angst and to some extent this has continued to be the case to the present day. The article suggests that while British colonial policy was always against, or at least not in favour of, the construction of a canal, other factors are equally important for explaining why canal proposals never proceeded beyond planning and surveys.

KEYWORDS: Kra, canal, colonial, Thailand, Singapore

INTRODUCTION

THAILAND'S isthmus of kra is a narrow stretch of land connecting the Malay Peninsula to the Asian continent. The Isthmus has been a source of constant speculation since at least the middle of the nineteenth century around the feasibility of constructing a shipping canal which would connect the Gulf of Thailand with the Andaman Sea and Indian Ocean. The possibility of a Kra shipping canal became a source of angst for British colonial interests on the Malay Peninsula, particular with regard to Singapore, from the mid-nineteenth century. Whilst Siam (renamed Thailand in 1939) was never formally colonised by a foreign power the issue of a canal was one where the demands of rival colonialisms impinged directly on the kingdom as it sought to balance the competing demands of imperial powers on its territory. In the post-colonial period speculation about a Kra canal continued with seeming predictable regularity. The announcement in 2014 that Chinese interests would construct a shipping canal

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through Nicaragua seems to have again fuelled speculation about a Kra canal (Boonma 2015; SinoShip News 2015). This article is an historical account of major canal proposals since the initial canal frenzy that began in the mid-nineteenth century. The research uses as its primary source British colonial records and publicly available sources from Singapore. It is not intended to reflect the Thai position on the various canal plans beyond official Thai responses as they are presented in these colonial sources. There is little doubt that canal proposals during the period of British and French colonial influence were unlikely to proceed as these two powers jockeyed for influence over, and containment of, Siam; a state that found itself in the unenviable position of being a buffer zone (Ingram 1971). However, it also appears that canal proposals (Figure 1) were often dropped or deferred for reasons of cost. There was little benefit to be derived when considered against the cost of constructing and maintaining the canal.

KRA AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MARITIME TRADE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

There are a number of factors that have underpinned the various schemes for a Kra canal since the nineteenth century. Economic and commercial considerations have been significant elements often accompanied by strategic concerns and/or rivalries. The construction of a Kra canal has always been presented by supporters as a way to cut shipping costs and/or as a means to provide strategic advantage for maritime trade and security. The issue became a matter of serious consideration as European colonial expansion in Asia throughout the nineteenth century gathered momentum and various powers competed for advantage in the region. Following Raffle's claim on Singapore in 1819, Britain found itself master of the most strategic maritime hub in Southeast Asia (Wurtzburg 1990 [1954]) further strengthening its expansive seaborne trade. Raffle's "inch of ground" (Raffles 1991 [1830]: 374) would ultimately become a centre-piece of regional and global maritime activity.

The strategic position that Britain held in the region was not one that went unchallenged by other colonial powers such as the Netherlands (Tarling 1962, 1975) though it was France that emerged as Britain's most significant rival in continental Southeast Asia (see Brailey 1999; Kiernan 1956). As France staked a claim on what became its Indochina colony, there was a protracted period of open rivalry with Britain which continued into the twentieth century. One result was that the two powers squeezed the Siamese kingdom to form a buffer zone between their respective territorial interests. For other colonial powers, including ultimately Japan, the issue of Britain's strategic advantage over the Malacca and Singapore Straits, and hence the major sea routes to the east and west motivated them to find alternative routes and was hence a

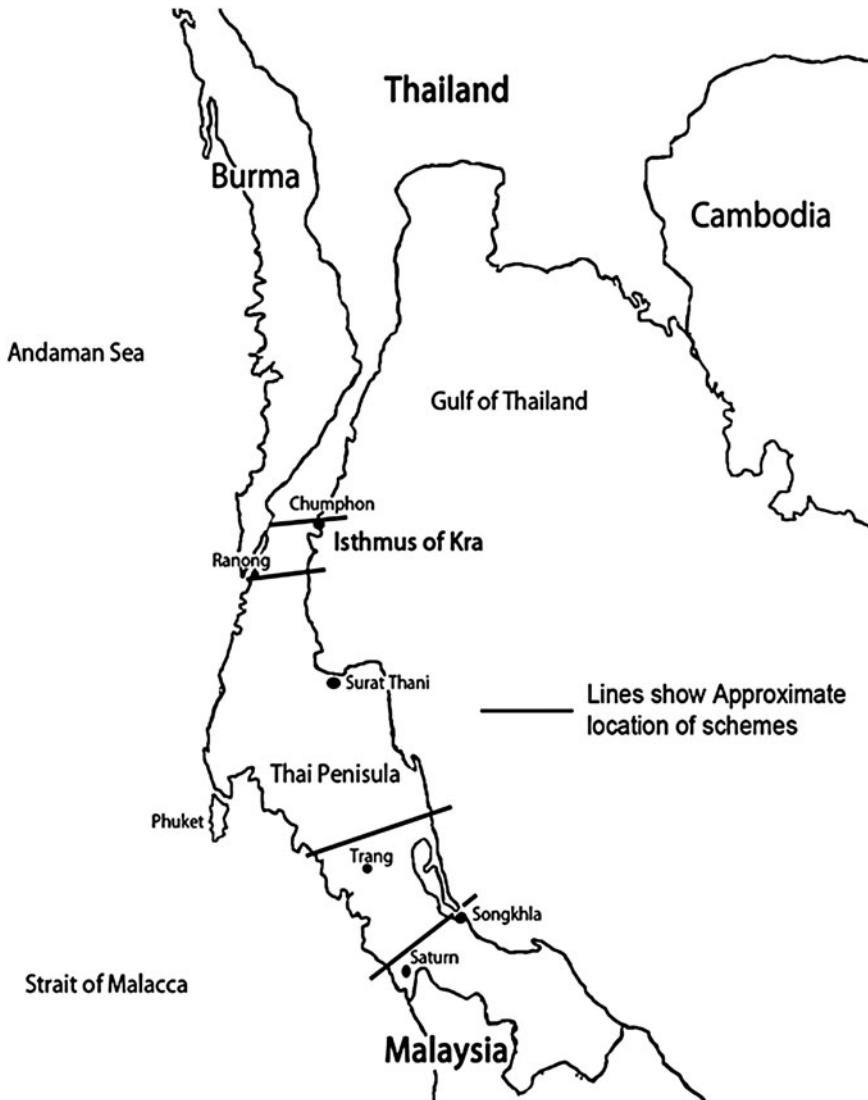


Figure 1. The Isthmus of Kra showing the approximate locations of the canal schemes. (Illustration by S. Dobbs, using base line map source D-Maps: <http://d-maps.com>)

strong factor in canal speculation. For Britain every scheme, no matter how unlikely, raised concerns about what a shipping canal would mean for the favourable position they had established for themselves in the Malay world. A commentator in the local press noted with regards to a Kra plan in the 1870s that, “a work of this kind would be a woeful blow” (Straits Observer 1876) to the commercial prospects of Singapore.

Economic and commercial factors continue to be important considerations in on-going proposals about a Kra canal up to the present and with good reason. The past half century has seen an enormous growth in global trading activity

connected with greater global interconnectedness at many different levels. The emerging economies of the developing world and in particular of the Asian region, with a population of around four billion, are playing an even greater role in global trade growth. The Asian region according to a special report of the *Review of Maritime Transport 2010* accounted for forty-one per cent of the total goods transported on ships putting this area ahead of other global regions. Rimmer notes that, “the Asian-Pacific region – stretching from the Kuriles to the Strait of Malacca – became the dominant arena within the world’s maritime economy during the last decade of the 20th Century” (Rimmer 2003: 35).

As in the earlier colonial era, the Straits of Malacca and Singapore play a vital role in this modern Asia centred commercial maritime world – a role that has only increased as the volume of trade passing through the region has burgeoned. The combined length of the sea route through both straits is around 700 miles. These two ocean passages are the “longest straits used for international navigation in the world” (Mohd 2012: 80). In international shipping circles this sea lane is of particular commercial and strategic importance because it is the shortest route between west and east and, in particular, between the major oil suppliers of the Middle East and developing and oil poor regions of Asia. China is a prominent oil consumer as are the other power house economies of the East Asian region, Japan and South Korea. The physical constraints and increasingly congested nature of these waters coupled with the world’s dependence on oil and other cargoes that pass through them means they are considered, even more than in the past, strategically important (United States Energy Information Administration 2011). Richardson notes, “these straits are integral parts of the same vast conveyor belt of seaborne commerce that runs between the Indian and Pacific oceans” (Richardson 2008: 115). According to the United States Energy Information Administration, the Straits of Malacca handle some 15.2 million barrels of oil per day (bbl/d) which means in terms of importance to global energy supplies this strait is second only to the Straits of Hormuz which handle 17 bbl/d (United States Energy Information Administration 2011 and 2014). By way of comparison with other major maritime trading arteries, using just this one crucially important global commodity, the Suez Canal and Sumed pipeline¹ combined carry a total of 4.6 bbl/d and the Panama Canal less than one million barrels per day (United States Energy Information Administration 2014). In Singapore’s 2004 statement to the International Court of Justice defending a maritime sovereignty claim, it was stated that on average more than 900 ships a day, or one ship every 1.6 minutes, were passing through the Straits of Singapore (Government of Singapore 2004: 10). Given this level of dependency on the Malacca and Singapore Straits for maritime trading activities, along with the expectation that this dependency will only

¹The Sumed pipeline runs from the Gulf of Suez to the Mediterranean Sea and with regards to oil is seen as an alternative to the Suez Canal.

increase in coming years, it is little wonder that speculation about the construction of a Kra canal has been on-going for over a century and a half.

THE 1850S AND EARLY CANAL SCHEMES

By the late 1850s, with work for the Suez Canal getting underway and with a trans-Atlantic cable about to link Europe to America, talk of a Kra canal was heard in Singapore and Bangkok. Sir John Bowring's account of his 1855 mission to Siam, published in 1857, raised hope that such a canal would be given serious consideration now that formal relations had been established between Britain and Siam (Bowring 1857: 5–6). His ideas on the matter were given public coverage in the Singapore press, although for the most part the idea was brushed off as impractical (Singapore Free Press 1857). The issue was raised officially by George Villiers, Earl of Clarendon and Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, in 1858, with Robert Schomburgk, Britain's Consul General in Siam, after a proposal was put forward by a Mr Henry Wise of Lloyds.² Less than three months after receiving a request for information, Schomburgk was replying in a most enthusiastic manner about the possibility of a canal, despite not having seen the terrain for himself, and relying for his information upon his counterpart in Pegu, Mr Edward O'Riley, whose experience had been limited to the "Bengal or western side"³ of the peninsula. In fact Schomburgk's lengthy correspondence and 'memorial' was a request for leave and costs to investigate and survey the region for himself even though he apparently intended to do so with or without the approval of his superiors, noting that if he acted "without having your Lordship's special approval and orders" it was due to his "zeal of ascertaining speedily and at the outset, the feasibility of a scheme interesting and important to the whole civilized world". His attached memorial from Bangkok of all the information he could glean on the issue reflects the wider optimistic sentiments of the era and what is perhaps his main motivation for supporting the Kra canal. It begins:

"The remarkable age in which we live numbers amongst the various startling inventions and projects which it has produced, the plan of three public works of so vast an interest, as to become of importance to the whole civilized world should they be carried out, namely the construction of a ship canal through Central America, the piercing of the Isthmus of Suez, and the connection of the old and new world by the Atlantic telegraph."⁴

²Foreign Office to R Schomburgk, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/10, 6 February 1858.

³R Schomburgk to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/11, No. 43, 31 May 1858.

⁴R Schomburgk to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), Foreign Office 69/11, No. 43, 31 May 1858.

After continuing at great length about the benefits of these projects (still in the making at this time) he links them to the Kra proposal he is supporting:

“While the interest for the execution of the two canals, namely the one in Central America, and the other in Egypt, has daily increased, another project in the East commences to raise the attention of persons interested either in commerce or in politics by the proposition of constructing a canal for ships through the Malay Peninsula at the Isthmus of Kraa (sic).”⁵

Schomburgk, in his efforts to promote the canal idea, suggested that the early Portuguese navigators in the region were aware of the benefits of such a canal. The long memorial is filled with quotes taken from O’Riley and Bowring which provide all manner of seemingly comprehensive data relating to length of navigable rivers and terrain features which would be encountered in any attempt to construct a canal. He estimated that the total amount of soil needing removal was “3,556,640,000 cubic feet”. While all this looked convincing on paper, O’Riley is quoted as saying, “as an approximate computation, I am of the opinion that 25 to 30 miles would be the maximum” distance required for “canalization”, yet he admitted that this was little more than an educated guess “in the absence of an actual survey”⁶. He was keen to stress the commercial value that would come from a canal that shortened the travel time between Britain’s interests in India and China by twenty-five days for sailing craft, and eight to nine days “at the lowest” for steam vessels. As if to drive this point home, Schomburgk notes that had a canal existed a year earlier when the Indian Mutiny occurred, the “China fleet and its armaments” might have arrived in time to help quell the uprising before it reached the extent it did. Another selling point was the claim that all manner of natural resources (such as coal, tin, and timber) existed along or near the proposed Kra route. The memorial continued over many pages in this vein filled with speculative details, such as: “Chinese coolies” could be employed for the excavation work along with the mutinous sepoys of the rebellion; Pulo Condore⁷ should be obtained as a service point for ships along the proposed canal route; and a lengthy discussion of how telegraph cables along with canals were going to link the entire empire of Britain to the rest of the world. Schomburgk also noted that some commercial interests in Singapore would be affected by a canal, and that it was not known how a proposal would be accepted by the Siamese who, of course, were the recognised sovereigns over the region⁸.

⁵R Schomburgk to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), Foreign Office 69/11, No. 43, 31 May 1858.

⁶R Schomburgk to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), Foreign Office 69/11, No. 43, 31 May 1858.

⁷This was held by the East India Company but lost in 1705 after a rebellion by the largely Asian troops stationed there which the British believed were supported by the “Chochin-Chinese”.

⁸R Schomburgk to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), Attached Memorial, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/11, No. 43, 31 May 1858.

Ultimately, this proposal produced no result. It was by no means the first such proposal in this period, however from this point on it became a regular issue for formal discussion and official comment with respects to new schemes of one sort or another being put forward. In future decades, the discussion from this period was reiterated whenever a new canal scheme was promoted. It coincides with Britain's expanded interest in the Malay Peninsula and the intensification of European colonial competition that ultimately resulted in Siam's territorial integrity being threatened, particularly by Britain and France. Brailey compares the "scramble for concessions" that developed in Siam as comparable with what occurred in China later in the century (Brailey 1999: 513). Following the Bowring Treaty with Britain of 1855, a floodgate opened to powerful states seeking economic advantage in Siam. Most concession seekers had little regard for Siam's sovereignty and took for granted that it would be "accommodating" to any demands making it "little better than a no-man's-land [between the British and French] wide open for exploitation" (Brailey 1999: 514). In this tumultuous political climate Siam, officially at least, followed the lead of Britain to gain support for its continued 'independence', with King Chulalongkorn reportedly seeing Britain as central to this end.⁹ For the Siamese political elite, each proposal generated a dilemma and produced rounds of discussion and decision making to cope effectively with demands of the colonial powers. The British colonial records related to Siam are replete with such proposals. In 1864 the Siamese questioned a proposed Kra railway scheme.¹⁰ Just two years later, in 1866, they refused another Kra canal proposal put forward by a French group headed by the Marquis de Rays, over concerns primarily about the "grave embarrassments which have arisen from a similar undertaking in Egypt".¹¹ So regularly would canal proposals occur in the following decades that Siamese Foreign Minister, Prince Devawongs Varodaya, described them in 1931 as a "hardy annual".¹²

THE 1880s AND A CANAL FRENZY

As Britain's interests in the region increased further southward in the Malay states, each canal proposal was seen as potentially threatening to its commercial interests on the Peninsula and particularly its great maritime entrepôt of

⁹Archer to Lansdowne (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 422/56, No. 316, 29 September 1902.

¹⁰Register of correspondence, The National Archives, Kew; London, Public Record Office (PRO) 30/33/2/4, (June 1856-April 1887).

¹¹Knox to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/40, No. 23, 12 May 1866.

¹²Dormer to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 442/89, No. 237, 23 Dec 1931.

Singapore. The 1880s witnessed a frenzy of canal speculation. The support of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the former French diplomat who was instrumental in the construction of the Suez Canal completed in 1869, in at least one of these proposals meant there was British interest in what the outcome might be should Siam grant a concession to the French. These were heady days for de Lesseps, with the Suez Canal already operating for more than a decade and widely applauded as a success, and his other great venture on the Panama Isthmus just getting under way. De Lesseps' involvement in any Kra project was sure to excite a mix of interest and angst. In fact Siam was confronted within the space of a few months in 1881 with two proposals, one from the British firm of Le Fevre¹³ and the other a French proposal with de Lesseps'.¹⁴ For the next several years there was continuing focus on canal proposals as various interested parties and individuals put new or modified schemes forward, thereby stoking the rivalry and tensions between the two European protagonists, France and Britain.

Britain's position with regard to this new round of canal schemes was something of a wavering one even when the proposals were put forward by British interests. When the firm of Le Fevre were told by the Siamese that they must receive the approval of the British Government, the British response was evasive and lukewarm at best. Essentially, they were informed by the Foreign Office that it would not commend any proposal to the Siamese state.¹⁵ It is indicative however of the cavalier way they perceived the sovereignty of Siam that they reserved, in follow up correspondence with Le Fevre, a role for themselves in what might ordinarily have seemed entirely a Siamese matter stating, "it is not proposed to express an opinion at present, and that it is one which can only be dealt with between the two governments."¹⁶ Though if a canal was to be built there was certainly a preference that it be in British hands and/or that Britain's growing interests in the region were protected. For example, in 1881, Julian Pauncefote at the Foreign Office was informed by the British firm of Dent (from Saigon) that there was talk by a local official (who referred to himself as the mayor of Saigon) of a French canal through the peninsula.¹⁷ This information seemed to support reports made a few months earlier, prompting Pauncefote to issue a memorandum stating that the consul in Bangkok should "use every endeavour to prevent a concession being granted to any but a British company

¹³Foreign Ministry (Bangkok) to Mason (Consul General London), The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 15, 12 July 1881.

¹⁴Palgrave to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 58, 22 September 1881.

¹⁵Foreign Office to Le Fevre & Co., The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 19, 19 December 1881.

¹⁶Foreign Office to Le Fevre & Co., The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 23, 31 December 1881.

¹⁷Dent to Pauncefote, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, 29 September 1881.

and without previous communication with H. M. G.” He also instructed the matter be sent to the India Office and Admiralty “with a view to considering what steps be taken to secure ourselves against the scheme being carried out under a foreign flag”.¹⁸ In the flurry of correspondence that went on in this period there are constant references to ensuring British interests are protected as well as the seeking of assurances from Siamese officials that no concessions will be granted without consulting with the government in London. In early 1882, King Chulalongkorn, according to Consul Palgrave, made a clear undertaking to defer any decision on a canal to the opinion of the British government¹⁹ (see also Kiernan 1956) and again in November Palgrave reported back to the Foreign Office “the reiterated assurances of the Siamese government that they have no intention of acting in any way contrary to your lordship’s orders in this respect.”²⁰ This was followed up again in February of 1882 by a more formal statement from the Siamese Minister for Foreign Affairs stating that no concessions would be granted for a canal without first consulting the British government. Assurance had again been sought due to the arrival of a French representative, a Mr. Ternisien, seeking a canal concession that “included the grant of a considerable amount of land and was backed by the offer of a large subsidy”.²¹

It would only be a matter of months before a further request was made for a canal concession which appeared in all substantive ways exactly the same as that proffered by Ternisien. This came via another French agent, Francois Deloncle, who claimed to be acting on behalf of “Mr Lesseps of whose moral and material support” he spoke of “loudly”.²² Once again the Siamese government was faced with a dilemma which they skirted by telling Deloncle that no decision could be made without first having discussions with other “treaty powers and to England in particular”. Whilst it was not at all clear how much support, if any, this scheme had from de Lesseps, Deloncle was known to have connections to him and was keen to flout this relationship, even suggesting that he would return to Siam later in the year accompanied by de Lesseps. Ultimately, he overreached himself with the Siamese government by suggesting that the King had given an assurance of a concession to de Lesseps. Deloncle’s tactic miscarried and he was informed by the Private Secretary’s Office at the Grand Palace that he had misunderstood the King who had merely suggested that he would rather “Lesseps had

¹⁸Pauncefote Memorandum, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, 5 October 1881.

¹⁹Palgrave to Granville, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/78, No. 14, 14 February 1882.

²⁰Palgrave to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 72, 14 November 1881.

²¹Palgrave to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 12, 3 February 1882.

²²Palgrave to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 43, 14 June 1882.

the concession than any other person”.²³ The letter went on to raise doubts about Deloncle’s right to act on de Lesseps’ behalf stating, “his Majesty gave no promise and is even unaware of your authority to act for M. de Lesseps. The concession you applied (for) in your own name not as attorney for M. de Lesseps”.

Continued speculation about a canal and in particular the persistence of French interests at this time, with the apparent backing of their government, resulted in Siam feeling pressure from both the British and French sides. Whilst most Siamese and foreigners, with the exception of the French, were, according to Consul Palgrave “against the scheme”, the issue was not going away.²⁴ He reported to the Foreign Office in April of 1882 that Siam was expecting further appeals from the French and that with French Government support “they must ultimately yield” despite their desire to not grant concession for a canal. He went on, “hence they would gladly know how far the British Government would be disposed to back them up on the refusal”.²⁵ Palgrave himself was clearly of the view that French interest in the Kra Isthmus was going to be ongoing and that the Siamese were right to be concerned about the vulnerability of their position. The British agent in Bangkok was also aware of domestic tensions in Siam itself and in particular concerns that the former regent of Chulalongkorn (Chao Phya Si Suriyawongse) and his son, also highly placed in the government, were supporters of a French concession and canal because of “personal advantages” including “bribes”. He suggested that though the king was not “under their thumb” as he had been in the past, he “is still much afraid of them”.²⁶ The colonial authorities were seemingly indecisive on the question of French involvement in a Kra Isthmus canal. On the advice of the India Office and Admiralty took the position, initially at least, that the main issue was working to ensure that the French (or other power) gained no territorial concession along a future canal, and that the rights of British subjects and shipping be recognized.²⁷

FROM HEARSAY TO SURVEY

The frenzy of canal speculation in the 1880s culminated with the first real survey for ascertaining the feasibility of such a project through the Kra Isthmus.

²³Palgrave to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), Enclosure: Private Secretary’s Office Grand Palace Bangkok, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 49, 29 June 1882.

²⁴Palgrave to Mr Hervy, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 34, 8 April 1882.

²⁵Palgrave to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 23, 1 April 1882.

²⁶Palgrave to Mr Hervy, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 34, 8 April 1882.

²⁷Downing Street to Foreign Office, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 103, 14 July 1882. India Office to Foreign Office, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 95, 3 July 1882.

Surprising as it seems, the whole idea up to this point was not based on any thorough technical study and largely built on the unsubstantiated claims of individuals. Whilst there had been a survey undertaken by Captain Fraser and Captain Forlong in 1861 this had been for the purpose of a rail line and they acknowledged in their report that the survey was “rough” and that a “careful survey would be necessary”.²⁸ Palgrave was in no doubt that many of the schemes were simply scams. In August of 1882 he noted in a private correspondence to Mr. Hervey that in his view the entire scheme was “a bubble, certainly a dirty and possibly a dangerous one”.²⁹ Hence, in January of 1883, the first real survey of a Kra Isthmus canal route was begun by a company of engineers sent out by de Lesseps at his own expense and not that of the Suez Canal Company.³⁰ The party was made up of nationals from several European nations and an English surveyor in the employ of King Chulalongkorn. The 1883 report on the mission by A. J. Loftus that followed this expedition was not supportive of a canal. Not because it was technically impossible, although from an engineering point of view it would be more difficult than most of the schemers suggested, but because in Loftus’ own words “the excavation of a ship canal... would answer no profitable purpose” (Loftus 1883). There was continued activity around this time with some direct correspondence between the Foreign Office in London and de Lesseps and the Suez Company.³¹ However, at least with respects to the Kra Isthmus proposal the frenzy of the 1880s was waning and there was some confidence that the French were likely to abandon any plans for a canal. Deloncle was back in Bangkok in February of 1884 with an official report from the previous year’s expedition publicly saying the scheme was dead.³² The same correspondence however noted concerns about another possible French route further to the south and hence even closer to British interests. Whilst speculation would continue, in truth, by the late 1880s the Kra canal frenzy was over. Moreover the spectacular failure of the French Panama Canal that ceased operation in 1889 due to bankruptcy proved a significant discouragement to further canal scheming on the Malay Peninsula for the time being at least.

²⁸Fraser and Forlong, “Report on a Route from the Mouth of the Pakehan to Kraw, and thence across the Isthmus of Kraw to the Gulf of Siam.” The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105. 26 April 1861. See public summary of their proposal in (Fraser and Forlong 1862–63)

²⁹Palgrave to Mr Heryv, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 153, 9 August 1882.

³⁰Palgrave to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 99, 28 December 1882; No. 7 January 15 1883; No. 21 1 March 1883.

³¹See, Downing Street to Foreign Office, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 68, 17 February 1883.

³²Newman to Secretary of State (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 69/105, No. 15. 22 February 1884.

JAPAN: CANAL SCARE

By the early years of the twentieth century Britain and France reached an accord with regards to the Malay Peninsula. Their April 1904 agreement was part of the continuing carve up of Siam which had seen France and Britain recognise each other's 'rights' on the Malay Peninsula and Mekong Basin respectively. There was also a secret agreement between Britain and Siam in 1897 which constrained Siam from granting any concessions to another foreign power on the Malay Peninsula without "the written consent of the British Government".³³ This was followed by a treaty in 1909 which finally settled the southern boundary between Siam and British Malaya and included a range of clauses and agreements which essentially maintained Britain's vetoing rights over the granting of concessions on the peninsula, including those regions which were now part of Siam by the treaty of 1909. This same protective arrangement for British interests was part of later treaties such as the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1925.³⁴ Whilst there were concerns about all manner of concessions (primarily mining), these agreements and treaty arrangements provided Britain with a sense of security regarding any future canal projects. This was a point clearly made by the Foreign Office, in London, in 1936, when the spectre of yet another canal was raised, this time purportedly sponsored by Japan.³⁵ There is no doubt that the European and American sense of threat posed by Japan at this time played a large part in conjuring up an imaginary threat that nevertheless caused a flurry of British diplomatic activity. In the years following the 1932 coup which ended the absolute monarchy, Siam became noticeably friendlier in its relations with Japan and there was considerable consternation in various European circles about this (Christian and Nobutake 1942). There was a notable increase in Japanese investment in a range of enterprises and the number of Japanese technicians and experts in the country increased significantly.³⁶

The rumours of Japan's interest in a canal began with a number of newspaper reports in Europe followed by inquiries raised in the British Parliament about these reports in 1933.³⁷ Reports continued to appear throughout the 1930s peaking around 1936 when 'respectable' papers in Europe (most notably in Denmark, Germany, and France) reported that a canal project was underway.

³³Edward H Strobel (Office of the General Advisor, Bangkok) to Sir Ralph Paget (U K Minister to Siam), "Memorandum", The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office 628/26/304, 4 September 1905.

³⁴Foreign Office to Longhurst, The National Archives, Kew; London, Office of Cabinet (CAB) 21/577, 21 April 1936.

³⁵Foreign Office to Longhurst, The National Archives, Kew; London, Office of Cabinet (CAB) 21/577, 21 April 1936.

³⁶Colonial Office 852/296/5, Commercial relations with Siam Japanese economic penetration", (1940).

³⁷Parliamentary Debates (United Kingdom), 26 March 1934, Vol. 287, c1616.

Many of these reports were then picked up by papers in Southeast Asia. *La Revue de Deux Mondes* reported that a contract had been signed between Japan and Siam in May 1934.³⁸ Copenhagen's *Politikcen* reported that there were already some two hundred Japanese engineers in Siam for the project and a further twenty thousand workers employed on the project.³⁹ The idea came up again in 1937 when an article entitled 'Britain faces Japan across Siam' was published in the American journal *Asia* which, alarmingly for the British, claimed to be based in part on an interview with Thailand's 'Strong Man' Prime Minister Phya Phahol.⁴⁰ The *Bangkok Times*, commenting on these reports, claimed that most of the reports were springing from "the inventive pens of American copy tasters" (*Bangkok Times* 1938). It cited an American journalist of the Associated Press who visited the region to see for himself and found, "no blasting (of rocks at any rate), no armed forces from Nippon, occupying all the accommodation in the 'city of Kra' to the detriment of trans peninsula tourists; all was quiet and ordinary..." (*Bangkok Times* 1938).⁴¹

From the records, British officials appear to have given little credit given to these accounts, at least on the ground in the region. However, they did result, as in an earlier period, in a flurry of official activity. It seems also that in this climate of Japan phobia, repeated denials by both Japanese and Siamese officials did nothing to quell the speculation. Clearly officials were used to this issue arising. Crosby, in a correspondence with Eden described it as a "familiar topic".⁴² He was clearly frustrated at having to repeatedly deal with canal rumours, telling Orde in the Foreign Office, "I address myself for the umpteenth time to the task of denying the immortal fairy tale anent the construction of a canal".⁴³ The Thais were similarly keen to deny and put to rest the constant speculation.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the issue of whether or not Britain could stop Thailand from building a canal was again brought to the fore. Whilst there seemed no possibility under the existing treaties for a concession to be given to another foreign power it was noted that there was nothing stopping Siam from constructing the

³⁸Longhurst to Foreign Office, The National Archives, Kew; London, Colonial Office (CO) 273/618/12, 12 March 1936.

³⁹Crosby to Orde (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Colonial Office (CO) 273/618/12, 25 March 1936.

⁴⁰Crosby to Eden, The National Archives, Kew; London, Colonial Office (CO) 273/631/10, 15 March 1937.

⁴¹Various correspondence in (Siam 1938), Foreign Office (FO) 371/22215.

⁴²Crosby to Eden, The National Archives, Kew; London, Office of Cabinet (CAB) 21/577, 24 August 1936.

⁴³Crosby to Orde (Foreign Office), The National Archives, Kew; London, Colonial Office (CO) 273/618/12, 25 March 1936.

⁴⁴Luang Pradist Manudharm (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangkok) to Crosby, The National Archives, Kew; London, Colonial Office (CO) 273/618/12, 31 March 1936.

canal on its own with “foreign advice or even assistance”.⁴⁵ There was concern that under these arrangements Japan could fund a canal and through its growing relationship with Siam pose a serious challenge to Britain’s strategic position in the region (Ronan 1936). There were certainly some who felt that Britain should be prepared to act as “the Americans have done at Panama” to preserve their interests in the event of the “the Japanese or some other foreign power trying to seize for itself the advantage which such a canal would confer”.⁴⁶ As in the past, it eventuated that the fears of a Japanese canal were even less founded than those of a French canal more than quarter century earlier. This scare was, as an Admiralty correspondence noted, “mythical”.⁴⁷ However, the documents of this period also highlight the extent to which Thailand’s sovereign rights were considered secondary to British interests.

POST WAR CANAL SCHEMES AND SCARES

The end of World War Two and the decolonisation of Southeast Asia as European powers lost their hold over their former colonies, did not see any let up in the number of proposals for a Kra canal. Nor did the degree of concern about the impact on British interests initially, and later Singapore’s interests, diminish. In the decades since World War Two, rumours and canal schemes have been touted involving Thailand, the United States, Japan, and more recently China. The war was barely over when canal talk filled the air. At a Singapore meeting of delegates for the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), in October 1949, a French delegate suggested that the commission should be the sponsor of a Kra canal. The idea was rejected by Thailand’s Prince Sakonwanakon as nothing more than a “myth”.⁴⁸ In fact, Britain had included in the peace treaty with Thailand in 1946 a clause (Article 7) which expressly prohibited the constructing of a Kra canal⁴⁹ that would remain in force until the mid-1950s. Whilst the Chiefs of Staff had some reservations about dropping this constraint from the ‘Exchange of Notes’ that took place between Thailand and Britain in 1954, the Foreign Office prevailed in its view that lifting the restriction was the best political course. This was a view strengthened by commitments from the Thai Foreign Minister to Lord Reading in 1952 that the Thais

⁴⁵Orde to Longhurst, The National Archives, Kew; London, Office of Cabinet (CAB) 21/577, 21 April 1936.

⁴⁶Greene to Longhurst, The National Archives, Kew; London, Colonial Office (CO) 273/618/12, 20 March 1936.

⁴⁷Admiralty to Longhurst, The National Archives, Kew; London, Office of Cabinet (CAB) 21/577, 5 May 1936.

⁴⁸*Straits Times* (Singapore), 8 October 1949.

⁴⁹See, “Minutes” A. Buxton, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office (FO) 371/106881, 2 February 1953.

would not “try to build a canal”.⁵⁰ Technically, however, this meant that from the early 1950s Thailand was free to pursue or allow canal ventures at its own discretion, although some elements of the media and some political factions in Thailand would for many years continue to suggest that Britain retained the power to prohibit such a development under the terms of the peace agreement.

News of American interest in a canal surfaced in 1956 when it was reported to the Foreign Office that two American engineers in Bangkok had claimed to be working for a Californian firm and had been conducting a survey for a canal.⁵¹ Less than a year later another report appeared in the media originating in Japan speculating on the prospect of a canal. This story was denied by the Thai Foreign Office as “dead as a door nail”. However, the British embassy in Bangkok was concerned that American interests were promoting such a scheme even though Thai thinking on the issue “was progressing on the right lines”.⁵² For more than a decade after this there was constant speculation about US involvement in a canal. There was further talk of an American backed canal in 1960 when a Rand Corporation Asia specialist mentioned to Mr. Palliser of the Foreign Office that he was investigating the idea of a canal for strategic reasons to avoid the US navy having to “shoot their way through the Malacca Straits”.⁵³ There was little doubt in the minds of British officials that the whole idea, though technically feasible, was one that would not progress beyond talk for financial and political reasons. There was also some consensus amongst British officials that a canal in Thailand would pose little threat to Singapore's maritime role even if it were built. Though with decolonisation underway they would not openly support any proposal which might put them offside with the Governments' of Malaysia and Singapore.

It also became clear by the late 1950s that there was real interest in official circles in Thailand for a canal. There was a view in British colonial and Foreign Office circles that the canal proposal was used by various senior officials and Thai politicians at this time for nationalistic reasons, not an unreasonable assumption when one considers that between 1949 and 1980 there were nine coup or attempted coups (Farrelly 2011).⁵⁴ The Thai Minister of Communications informed journalists in 1962 that “a number of foreign countries had offered to

⁵⁰See, “Minutes” Mr Snellgrove, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office (FO) 371/123661, 15 July 1956.

⁵¹J B Johnston to F S Tomlinson, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office (FO) 371/123661, 27 June 1956.

⁵²British Embassy, Bangkok to Foreign Office, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office (FO) 371/129636, 22 June 1957.

⁵³Mr Palliser to Southeast Asia Department, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office (FO) 371/186175, 2 March 1966.

⁵⁴<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2011/03/08/counting-thailands-coups/>

conduct a survey of the Kra Isthmus”.⁵⁵ In the same year the Golden Peninsula Development Company (GPDC)⁵⁶ was created and gained Thai government approval for a new canal proposal some two hundred miles south of the Kra Isthmus though the scheme retained the Kra canal name.⁵⁷ The company had support from several European and American firms and would be a lead player in canal scheming for more than a decade. This new GPDC canal would be a grand one with large ports on either side of the peninsula and a fleet of coastal vessels to shuttle goods around the region. The *Economist* in an article titled ‘A Very Big Ditch’ posed the question would it be a “white elephant or golden goose” (*Economist* 1963) and the tone of the article suggested its author believed the former. The Thai government also set up a ‘special committee’ in 1962, under the minister of Communications and Defence, to oversee canal issues.⁵⁸ These developments resulted in a string of articles in the media in Singapore and other countries relating to this latest proposed canal.⁵⁹ Singapore’s new Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, became so disturbed by the reports that his Government officially appealed to Britain for help but also appointed an economist, Mr Sturme, to investigate (secretly) the impacts of a canal on Singapore.⁶⁰ His findings ultimately reconciled with those of the Colonial and Foreign Offices and other interested parties that the project was not feasible, though he was somewhat more cautionary in his views of the possible impact on Singapore.⁶¹ The real issue of his report was the economic value of a canal: Would the project be a worthwhile one for investors? On this point his study found it was not justifiable on economic grounds.

Whilst there was a flurry of canal speculation from the late 1950s that would last more than a decade, once again the idea appeared to simply run out of supporters. In October of 1972 an Information Brief for the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office noted that despite a July announcement by the Thai National Executive Council (NEC) that a further feasibility study was to be undertaken, opinion was that there was little chance of the project advancing. The Brief noted the links between the GPDC, which had been advancing the canal cause for more than a decade, and the NEC. Four of the GPDC’s directors were

⁵⁵Cable to Brown, The National Archives, Kew; London, Colonial Office (CO) 1030/1119, 7 May 1962.

⁵⁶The GPDC had a Geneva based subsidiary called the Kra Canal Company.

⁵⁷Chow to Cooke, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office (FO) 371/175361, 27 January 1964.

⁵⁸Cable to Brown, The National Archives, Kew; London, Colonial Office (CO) 1030/1119, 7 May 1962.

⁵⁹See, *Sunday Mail* (London), 12 February 1962, *Straits Times* (Singapore), 13 February 1962, 9 March 1962, *Singapore Free Press* (Singapore), 8 January 1962, *Observer* (London), 4 February 1962.

⁶⁰Hammer to Higham, The National Archives, Kew; London, Colonial Office (CO) 371/175361, 28 March 1963.

⁶¹Correspondence in, The National Archives, Kew; London, Colonial Office (CO) 371/175361.

members of the NEC and half the company's shares were held by the Revolutionary Party. The company's director, Mr. K.Y. Chow, visited the U. S. in July and August of 1972 to promote the project where he discussed with representatives of the Atomic Energy Agency 'a ploughshare⁶² style nuclear excavation of an alternative, longer and most costly canal without locks'⁶³. The theory being that a series of underground nuclear explosions (PNEs) would be used to melt the earth to form a permanent canal bed and this only then required the filling to be excavated. A Preliminary Survey Report costing US\$400,000 was commissioned by Chow with several American companies. Ultimately, the survey, consisting of four volumes, was delivered to the Thai Government in 1973 (Rajaretnam 1978). There was a general lack of interest on the part of the United States as well as Japan to be involved in this canal scheme.⁶⁴ A Foreign and Commonwealth Office Brief concluded that reluctance on the part of the Japanese and Americans meant that 'Mr Chow's 'folie de gradeur', will not be realized'⁶⁵.

CONTINUING CANAL SPECULATION

The speculation about a Kra canal is certainly a 'hardy annual'. The issue is one that simply will not go away. Since the 1970s there has been a string of schemes which have been reported on in the media with varying degrees of official governmental support in Thailand. The issue has been one of constant review since the GPDC period. Between 1998 and 1999 a ten chapter 'pre-feasibility study' was carried out by Japan based Global Infrastructure Fund and a Thai firm, Productivity Management Company (Bangkok Post 2000). More recently China has been linked to canal projects in a bid to ensure uninterrupted oil supplies and overcome what has been described as its 'Malacca dilemma' (Kong 2010: 58). The *South China Morning Post* reported in August 2003 that China was forced to look to a Kra canal option after plans for a pipeline into central Asia did not eventuate (South China Post 2003; Straits Times 2004; The Australian 2004). Speculation about a China involvement with the construction of a Kra canal has continued almost unabated and is likely to increase now that it appears a Nicaragua canal will be constructed by Chinese interests (Moles 2013, Chankaiyee 2014, Boonma 2015). In 2005, a senate feasibility study was to go before the Thai government for consideration and was being discussed at great length in the media with speculation on ten year timelines for completion

⁶²This is a biblical reference relating to the idea of turning swords into ploughshares or in this case nuclear explosions for peaceful purposes. Also, known as Peaceful Nuclear Explosions (PNEs).

⁶³Information Brief, The National Archives, Kew; London, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 15/1652, 5 October 1972.

⁶⁴Various correspondence in, The National Archives, Kew; London, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 15/1652.

⁶⁵Information Brief, The National Archives, Kew; London, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 15/1652, 5 October 1972.

(Sydney Morning Herald 2005). The pattern of these schemes, however, run a familiar course for anyone acquainted with the history of Kra canal speculation. There is a flurry of reports and statements from various interested parties all of which suggest that the project is set to proceed and these are followed shortly after by reports playing down the likelihood of any development (as happened with China's flirtation with the idea), or the matter simply disappears until its next revival. Such is the frequency of the schemes that even in Singapore, where there has always been the most angst about a canal's impact on its port, there seems these days to be little public concern. Singapore's Prime Minister in 2002, Goh Chok Tong, told Thailand's *The Nation* newspaper, "if the Thais find the Kra canal commercially feasible, go ahead ... we have done our homework. We think the project won't take off" (The Nation 2002). The circular nature of both the schemes and outcomes is no better summed up than in a news report from 2000 detailing a revived plan to use nuclear explosions (PNEs) for the creation of a Kra canal, the proposal was subsequently rejected (Straits Times 2000).

It seems there is little likelihood of an end to Kra scheming. As the Malacca and Singapore Straits become increasingly congested the impetus to continue scheming is likely to grow. Similarly, it has never been established that a canal could not be built from a technical point of view in any one of several different locations (Thapa *et al.* 2007). The discussion hinged on questions of the most suitable location in terms of topography, distance, and whether or not locks would be required. Yet, the insurmountable obstacles of the past remain. For much of the colonial era until the 1950s, British colonial policy was squarely obstructionist, if not outright hostile, toward a canal. However, there were always other practical obstacles which it is fair to say were factored into British colonial thinking on the matter that guided them in⁶⁶ their assessment that the project would never go beyond discussions. Perhaps the most significant of these is the reality that a Kra canal, unlike the Panama and Suez Canals, does not reduce by an entire continent the transport time and costs of seaborne cargo. Even the staunchest proponents of the most recent schemes acknowledge a saving in sailing time of only around twenty-eight to forty hours depending on where along the peninsula a canal was built (Kra Canal Special Economic Zone). As with earlier schemes the reduced sailing times do not seem to justify the huge financial investment that would be required: estimated in 1972 at £180 million (The Guardian 1972) and in 2006 at more than US\$20 billion (Pehrson 2006: 4). The construction cost is only one factor in the ledger. There is also the cost of maintaining a canal and what that would translate into in the form of charges for shippers. This explains why since the GPDC's proposal in the 1960s the various canal schemes have involved plans for an industrialization of the south of Thailand involving a series of 'mega-projects'. Another significant impediment to advancing a Kra

⁶⁶Waterstone to Whyte, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office (FO) 371/180425, 13 May 1965.

canal project is the seemingly intractable state of Thailand's domestic political situation which has continued to be volatile since the 2006 coup and fall from grace of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. After years of civil unrest and another coup in 2014, there seems little hope that the domestic politics of Thailand is going to settle anytime soon. This turmoil, just as in the colonial era, makes the sort of international investment needed for a canal project even more difficult to secure. Within Thailand there has been a concern that dates back to the foundations of the modern state about what a canal might mean for domestic security. The fear being that it would, in a sense, physically cut off the predominately Muslim south from the Buddhist north (The Australian 2004)⁶⁷. One correspondent summed this concern up in the following way: "the break-up of the country, the Thai state fears, would boost the desire for a resurrection of the ancient kingdom of Pattani, which would occupy the space between the lower part of the canal and Thai-Malaysian border" (The Korean Herald 2004). Another factor often cited by canal enthusiasts is the threat of piracy in the Malacca Strait. Whilst the issue of piracy in the Malacca Strait is one that always gains wide publicity, recent reports in the media talk of how piracy in the straits has been defeated (The Guardian (London) 2008). Perhaps more significant is the extensive study of the issue by Carolin Liss pointing out the extent to which piracy in the straits has long been something of a 'chimera' at least in terms of posing a real threat to global maritime trade (Liss 2010). Suggesting that any future canal scheme will have no appeal on the basis of avoiding this exaggerated 'risk'.

Whether or not a Kra shipping canal will ever be constructed is obviously an open question. European colonial rivalry and an enthusiasm for grand engineering projects historically meant that canal talk was always going to generate a high degree of interest. The old colonial policy of maintaining Thailand as a buffer state once stood in the way of a Kra Canal, but has long since disappeared. China is also now a major force in the region and seems to have some interest in the idea of a Kra canal for strategic and commercial reasons. However, an examination of the history of canal proposals suggests a mix of prohibitive factors (commercial, political, and practical) have always stood in the way of actual construction and that these were perhaps always as important as colonial rivalry in stalling canal plans. This suggests that a canal is no closer to becoming a reality today than it was in the 1850s. One can be forgiven for taking the view of the British embassy in Bangkok in 1956 in relation to rumours circulating of yet another canal: "we remain therefore of the view that nothing will come of all this pother ... with one qualification, however: anything can happen in Thailand"⁶⁸.

⁶⁷See also, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, "Outward Savingram", The National Archives, Kew; London, British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 15/1652, 7 July 1972.

⁶⁸British Embassy, Bangkok to Foreign Office, The National Archives, Kew; London, Foreign Office (FO) 8 February 1956.

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