Portuguese, Dutch and British rivalry in the Straits

Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland and Germany),
Solicitor (England & Wales and Hong Kong)
Of Counsel, KGP Legal LLC
alexander.ressos@kgplegal.com.sg
www.ressos.com.sg

The Estado da Índia and the cartaz system

The Portuguese who conquered Malacca in 1511 brought a new model of trade to the Strait. The Estado da Índia, the Portuguese empire in Asia, sought to control the most profitable routes by force and to tax the trade of others by a system of passes, the *cartazes*, which Asian ships had to buy in order to sail unmolested.[1] Malacca became a fortress and a customs post with a changed commercial constitution: the Muslim merchants who had made the sultanate's fortune were now the enemies of its new rulers.

The Portuguese model failed to capture the trade of the Strait as a whole. Muslim merchants diverted their traffic to other ports – to Aceh, to Johor, to Banten in western Java – and the trade of the region dispersed. Malacca under Portuguese rule remained an important port, but it lost the centrality it had enjoyed under the sultans. The lesson, which recurs throughout the history of the Strait, is that a port that relies on coercion drives away the merchants on whose voluntary presence its wealth depends.

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

The VOC and the monopoly model

The Dutch East India Company (VOC), founded in 1602, pursued a similar model with greater resources. From its headquarters at Batavia, established in 1619, it sought monopolies in the trade of fine spices and control over the shipping of the archipelago through treaties with local rulers.[2] After the capture of Malacca in 1641, the Dutch used the city to control the Strait and to divert trade to Batavia. They imposed restrictive contracts on the rulers of the region and, where necessary, enforced them by force, as in Riau in 1784.

The monopoly model produced revenue for the Company and hostility among merchants. By restricting trade and raising its costs, it created a demand for alternative ports where merchants could trade freely. The British country traders who operated between India and China in the eighteenth century, and the Chinese, Bugis and Malay traders of the archipelago, looked for such ports. Their search created the opportunity that Raffles later used.

The burning of 1613 and the long eclipse

During the conflict between Johor and the Portuguese, the island of Singapore suffered a further blow. In 1613, a settlement at the mouth of the Singapore River was burnt to the ground by the Portuguese.[3] The attack formed part of the war against Johor, whose outposts the Portuguese sought to destroy. After 1613, the island disappears almost entirely from the sources for two centuries. It remained on the maps as a landmark for navigation and its waters were used by the orang laut, although it had no market of importance.

The long eclipse of Singapore between the seventeenth and the early nineteenth centuries confirms the lesson of the fall of Singapura. The geographical advantages of the island were unchanged. What was missing was a ruler or a power willing and able to establish a secure market there. The trade of the southern Strait flowed to Malacca, to Johor's shifting capitals and to Riau. The island waited for a political change that would make its position valuable again.

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

The British country trade and Penang

That change came with the British. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the English East India Company expanded its trade with China. At the same time private British merchants, the country traders, carried Indian goods – cotton textiles and, increasingly, opium – to the ports of Southeast Asia and China. Because the route to Canton passed through the Strait, the British needed a port where their ships could shelter, refit and trade outside Dutch control.

The first British answer was Penang, an island off the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, which Francis Light acquired from the sultan of Kedah in 1786.[4] Penang was declared a free port and grew rapidly, but its position in the northern Strait was too far from the southern route to China to command the traffic that passed through the Singapore Strait. During the Napoleonic Wars, when the Netherlands fell under French control, the British occupied Malacca and other Dutch possessions in Asia, which they agreed to return after the peace.[5] The return of Malacca and Java to the Dutch in 1818 revived the prospect of Dutch control over the Strait, and with it the risk that British trade to China would be subject to Dutch dues and restrictions.

The succession dispute and the opening for 1819

The political fragmentation of the Johor-Riau sultanate provided the opening. When the sultan died in 1812, the succession was contested between his two sons, Hussein and Abdul Rahman.[6] Abdul Rahman, supported by the Bugis faction and later by the Dutch, was installed in Riau, while Hussein, the elder, was passed over. Meanwhile the Temenggong Abdul Rahman, the chief responsible for the mainland of Johor and the island of Singapore, had moved his residence to the Singapore River in 1811.[7]

When Raffles' expedition arrived at Singapore on 29 January 1819, having landed on St John's Island the previous day, he found a Malay chief willing to negotiate and a legitimate claimant to the throne who could be recognised as sultan.[8] The treaty of 6 February 1819, concluded with Hussein as sultan and with the Temenggong, gave the East India Company the right to establish a factory on the island.[9] The details of the

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

agreements and of the treaty settlement of 1824 belong to the next two chapters. For present purposes, it is enough to note that the British foundation was made possible by the same forces that had shaped the Strait for centuries: the rivalry of outside powers, the fragmentation of local authority and the search of merchants for a port where they could trade on fair terms.

Anglo-Dutch rivalry ended with a partition. The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 divided the Johor-Riau world along the Singapore Strait: the islands to the south fell into the Dutch sphere, the peninsula and Singapore into the British.[10] A political border was drawn through waters that had been a single cultural and commercial space. The border still separates Singapore and Malaysia from Indonesia. The relations across it, discussed in Part I of this book, remain shaped by the shared history it divided.

Notes

1. On the *cartaz* system of the Estado da Índia, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia 1500–1700: A Political and Economic History*, 2nd edition, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. ↩
2. The VOC was founded in 1602 and established Batavia (Jakarta) in 1619; for the Company's monopoly strategy in the archipelago, see Femme S. Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company: Expansion and Decline*, Zutphen, Walburg Pers, 2003. ↩
3. Wikipedia, "Temasek" (accessed September 2026): "A settlement there was finally burnt to the ground by the Portuguese in 1613." ↩
4. Francis Light established the British settlement on Penang in 1786 under an arrangement with the sultan of Kedah; see Wikipedia, "George Town, Penang" and "Francis Light". ↩
5. British forces occupied Malacca in 1795 during the French Revolutionary Wars; the Dutch possessions in Asia were returned under the Anglo-Dutch Convention of 1814, and Malacca was handed back in 1818. ↩

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

6. Wikipedia, “Johor Sultanate” (accessed September 2026): on the sultan’s death in 1812, succession was contested between the brothers Hussein and Abdul Rahman. ↩
7. Wikipedia, “Founding years of modern Singapore” (accessed September 2026): the Temenggong Abdul Rahman relocated to Singapore from Johor in 1811. ↩
8. Wikipedia, “Founding years of modern Singapore” (accessed September 2026): Raffles’ expedition arrived in Singapore on 29 January 1819, having landed on St John’s Island the previous day. ↩
9. Wikipedia, “Founding years of modern Singapore” (accessed September 2026): the agreement “was ratified with the Treaty of Singapore signed on 6 February 1819”. ↩
10. Wikipedia, “Johor Sultanate” (accessed September 2026): the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 “ultimately partitioned the sultanate’s territories”. ↩

Disclaimer

This article is provided for general information only. It is based on publicly available sources as at its date of publication. These sources have not been independently verified against licences, regulatory registers or the records of the entities concerned. It is not legal, tax, financial or investment advice. Nor is it a recommendation to invest in, transact with or use the services of any entity mentioned. Law and regulation change frequently, so the content may be incomplete or outdated. To the fullest extent permitted by law, Dr Alexander Ressos and the publisher of SingaporeIQ exclude all liability for loss or damage arising from the use of or reliance on this article. Readers should obtain advice on their specific circumstances before acting or refraining from action.

Names and trademarks of the entities discussed belong to their owners and are used for identification only. Their mention implies no endorsement, affiliation or allegation of wrongdoing. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. Corrections and updates: contact@ressos.com.

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. This article may be quoted with attribution to SingaporeIQ (SingaporeIQ.com). Reproduction in full and any commercial use require prior written consent. The Legal Terms at https://singaporeiq.com/legal-terms apply.

Author contact: Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP · contact@ressos.com

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.