The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824

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The negotiations

The dispute over Singapore was one of several questions that divided Britain and the Netherlands in Asia after the Napoleonic Wars. Both powers had an interest in a settlement. Britain wanted a stable and friendly Netherlands in Europe, as a buffer against France, whereas the Dutch wanted to secure their position in the archipelago and to limit British competition. The negotiations, which began in 1820, were interrupted for three years and resumed in 1823.

The Dutch position changed in the course of the negotiations. Research in the Dutch archives has shown that the Dutch negotiator, Anton Reinhard Falck, came to regard Singapore as a bargaining chip with which to extract concessions elsewhere. He concluded that relinquishing it would not amount to a genuine loss for the Dutch empire.[1] The British side was represented by George Canning, the Foreign Secretary, and Charles Williams-Wynn, the Dutch side by Hendrik Fagel and Falck.[2]

The treaty was signed in London on 17 March 1824. The United Kingdom ratified it on 30 April 1824 and the Netherlands on 2 June 1824, with the exchange of ratifications on 8 June 1824.[3]

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The territorial settlement

The treaty resolved the territorial questions by exchange. Britain ceded Fort Marlborough at Bencoolen and all its possessions on the island of Sumatra to the Netherlands, and undertook not to establish further offices or conclude treaties there. The Netherlands ceded the city and fort of Malacca to Britain and undertook not to establish offices or conclude treaties on the Malay Peninsula.[4] The Netherlands withdrew its opposition to the British occupation of Singapore, in return for which Britain accepted Dutch control of the island of Billiton.[5]

The provision on Singapore, Article 12 of the treaty, transferred the island to the British sphere without describing the legal basis of the British presence.[6] The Dutch withdrew their objection without recognising the validity of the treaty of 1819. For the Company, this was sufficient. The question of the settlement's legal title vis-à-vis the Malay rulers remained to be settled locally, a task Crawfurd completed a few months later.

Commercial provisions

The treaty also contained commercial provisions that reflected the free-trade ideas of the time. Subjects of each power received most-favoured-nation treatment in the territories of the other in British India, Ceylon and the East Indies, provided that they obeyed local regulations.[7] The parties undertook not to establish new settlements without the approval of the European government concerned and to act together against piracy.[8]

The piracy clause deserves attention in the light of the previous chapters. The sea peoples of the Riau-Lingga archipelago, whose loyalty had once guaranteed the security of Malay ports, were now outside any effective political order. Raiding became a serious threat to the trade of Singapore in the following decades. Once suppression of piracy had become a task of the colonial navy, the security of the sea lanes, once a service provided by Malay rulers through the orang laut, became a public good provided by an imperial power.

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The border through the Johor-Riau world

The treaty officially demarcated what became British Malaya from what became the Dutch East Indies along a line that became a modern international border.[9] It ran through the Singapore Strait and separated the peninsula and Singapore from the islands of Riau, dividing the old Johor-Riau sultanate into a British and a Dutch half. The rival sultans of the succession dispute of 1812 found themselves on opposite sides of the line: Hussein under British protection in Singapore, Abdul Rahman under Dutch protection in Riau.

The consequences of the border are still visible. Singapore and the Malaysian state of Johor lie on one side, the Indonesian province of the Riau Islands on the other. The economic relationships across the Strait – Indonesian wealth in Singapore, the industrial zones of Batam and Bintan, the flows of people and capital – cross a line drawn by European diplomats in London. Part I of this book examines these relationships.

Notes

1. Peter Borschberg, "Dutch Objections to British Singapore, 1819–1824: Law, Politics, Commerce and a Diplomatic Misstep", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 50, issue 4, December 2019 (abstract). ↩
2. Wikipedia, "Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824" (accessed September 2026): negotiators Hendrik Fagel and Anton Reinhard Falck for the Netherlands, George Canning and Charles Williams-Wynn for the United Kingdom. ↩
3. Wikipedia, "Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824" (accessed September 2026): signed in London on 17 March 1824; ratified by the UK on 30 April 1824 and by the Netherlands on 2 June 1824; ratifications exchanged on 8 June 1824. ↩
4. Wikipedia, "Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824" (accessed September 2026): Britain ceded "Fort Marlborough in Bencoolen and all British possessions on the island of Sumatra"; the Netherlands ceded "the city and fort of Malacca", with reciprocal undertakings not to establish offices or conclude treaties. ↩

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5. Wikipedia, "Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824" (accessed September 2026): the Netherlands withdrew opposition to the British occupation of Singapore; Britain accepted Dutch control of Billiton. ↩

6. Borschberg, "Dutch Objections to British Singapore, 1819–1824", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 50, issue 4, December 2019 (abstract: transfer of Singapore to British control through Article 12). ↩

7. Wikipedia, "Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824" (accessed September 2026): most-favoured-nation treatment in British India, Ceylon and the East Indies for subjects who "obey local regulations". ↩

8. Wikipedia, "Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824" (accessed September 2026), on the prohibition of new settlements without European government approval and joint action against piracy. ↩

9. Wikipedia, "Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824" (accessed September 2026): the treaty "demarcated British Malaya … from the Dutch East Indies", establishing boundaries that became modern international borders. ↩

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