

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20721136

THE SHIFT IN GEOPOLITICAL STATUS BETWEEN VIETNAM AND SIAM WITHIN THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN REGIONAL ORDER DURING THE 19TH CENTURY

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Received: 09/12/2025

Accepted: 22/02/2026

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the transformation of geopolitical status and power competition between Vietnam (under the Nguyen Dynasty) and Siam (under the Chakri Dynasty) within the Southeast Asian regional order during the 19th century. In the first half of the century, both nations sought to expand their influence over buffer zones such as Cambodia and the Lao principalities, creating a tense "dual hegemony." The study indicates that while Vietnam, particularly under Emperor Minh Mang, attempted to establish a regional order based on a Confucian centralist model, Siam demonstrated greater flexibility in adapting to Western pressures. The shift in status occurred not only on the battlefield but also in diplomatic ideology and the capacity to adapt to the emerging international relations system. Utilizing historical methodology and international relations analysis, the paper elucidates the factors leading to the rebalancing of forces: moving from a traditional power equilibrium to a period where both faced the encroachments of French and British colonialism. The findings confirm that this shift reshaped the political boundaries and identities of mainland Southeast Asia, leaving profound legacies for the regional order in the early modern era. This research contributes a nuanced perspective on how indigenous powers negotiated their positions amidst the transition from traditional tributary systems to modern nation-state frameworks.

KEYWORDS: Nguyen Dynasty, Chakri Dynasty, Vietnam-Siam Relations, Southeast Asian Geopolitics, 19th-Century Regional Order.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 19th century marked a period of tumultuous transformation in Southeast Asian history, as traditional feudal orders began to tremble under the expanding wave of Western colonialism. Within this context, the relationship between Vietnam (under the Nguyen Dynasty) and Siam (under the Chakri Dynasty) was far more than mere neighborly interaction; it was a fierce geopolitical competition aimed at establishing hegemony over mainland Southeast Asia. The shift in status between these two nations unfolded within a complex strategic space where buffer zones, such as Cambodia and the Lao principalities, played a pivotal role in maintaining the regional balance of power.

During the first half of the 19th century, under the reigns of Emperor Minh Mang in Vietnam and Kings Rama I, II, and III in Siam, both nations reached the zenith of their military prowess and political influence. Vietnam, guided by a Confucian-centric ideology, sought to establish a regional order where smaller states were expected to submit to the "Celestial Court" in Hue. Conversely, Siam pursued a similar expansionist policy, leading to decades of direct and indirect confrontations, most notably the Vietnamese-Siamese War (1833-1834) and the protracted disputes over the protectorate of Cambodia.

However, the emergence and deepening intervention of British and French colonial powers fundamentally altered the geopolitical chessboard. While Siam began to recognize the magnitude of Western power and gradually shifted toward a flexible diplomatic strategy—often termed "bamboo diplomacy"—Vietnam, particularly under Emperor Tu Duc, struggled to reconcile the preservation of traditional values with the necessity of countering French colonial aggression. At this juncture, the shift in status was no longer merely a two-horse race between indigenous powers; rather, it became a test of each nation's capacity to adapt to a new international relations system imposed by the West.

This study focuses on analyzing the transition of status from a "dual hegemony" confrontation to the disintegration of the traditional order under the impact of colonialism. By exploiting diverse historical sources from both sides, including the *Veritable Records of Dai Nam* from Vietnam and *The Dynastic Chronicles, Bangkok Era* from Siam, this article elucidates how indigenous actors in Southeast Asia interacted, competed, and reshaped their positions during a century of profound upheaval.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of Vietnam-Siam relations in the 19th century has attracted significant attention from both domestic and international scholars, employing diverse approaches ranging from political and diplomatic history to regional geopolitics. A review of existing literature reveals that the shift in status between the two nations was not an isolated process but part of a broader transformation within the Southeast Asian order.

2.1. Regional Order and the Traditional Tributary System

Classical studies on mainland Southeast Asia often emphasize the "Mandala" model or a "multipolar order" where indigenous powers like Vietnam and Siam acted as competing centers of authority (Wolters, 1999). According to Nguyen Van Luan (2024), during the first half of the 19th century, the Nguyen Dynasty strived to construct an order based on a Confucian worldview, positioning Hue as a civilized center to counterbalance the expansion of the Chakri Dynasty in Bangkok. International scholars, such as Thiphakorawong (1978), through the editing of dynastic chronicles, acknowledge Siam's efforts to consolidate power in the Mekong basin, leading to overlapping spheres of influence over intermediate principalities.

2.2. Competition in Buffer Zones: Cambodia and Laos

The crux of scholarly work on Vietnam-Siam relations lies in the issues of Cambodia and the Lao *mừơngs*. Chandler (2008), in his research on Cambodian history, argued that the country served as a strategic "buffer zone" where both Vietnam and Siam sought to impose protectorates to ensure border security. The Quy Hop Documents (2000) provide critical evidence of the Hue court's sustained relations with Lao principalities to block Siamese encroachment from the West. The struggle for power in these regions was not merely a military conflict but a contest over political legitimacy and the loyalty of local chieftains (Nguyen Minh Tuong, 2015).

2.3. Western Colonial Impact and the Shift in Geopolitical Status

The latter half of the 19th century witnessed the intervention of Britain and France, fundamentally altering the nature of the Vietnam-Siam status race. Lieberman (2003) argued that colonial pressure forced indigenous powers to restructure their administrative apparatus and diplomatic thinking.

While Siam successfully maintained relative independence through administrative reforms and flexible diplomacy (Thiphakorawong, 1969), Vietnam faced the gradual collapse of its defense systems and the loss of control over strategic territories (Duong The Hien, 2014). Modern scholarship emphasizes that the shift in status during this period was dictated by the capacity for "modernization" and integration into the emerging international system.

Research Gap: Although previous studies have deeply analyzed individual wars or the foreign policies of each country, there remains a lack of comprehensive works that analyze the *status shift* from a geopolitical perspective throughout the entire 19th century by cross-referencing primary sources from both nations. This article aims to fill that gap.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, the shift in geopolitical status between Vietnam and Siam is analyzed through a multi-layered theoretical framework that integrates traditional Southeast Asian political models with modern International Relations (IR) theories. This approach elucidates not only military conflicts but also the fundamental changes in the strategic thinking of the two nations.

3.1. The Mandala Model and Traditional Power Structure

The primary foundation of this framework is the *Mandala* model, a crucial concept for understanding pre-colonial Southeast Asian power structures. As defined by Wolters (1999), the Mandala describes a system of overlapping circles of kingship without fixed boundaries, where the authority of a central power (such as Hue or Bangkok) radiates outward and diminishes with distance. During the 19th century, both the Nguyen Dynasty and the Chakri Dynasty envisioned themselves as the centers of distinct Mandalas. The intersection and friction between these two Mandalas in buffer zones like Cambodia and the Lao states were the core causes of instability within the regional order. This article employs this theory to explain why Vietnam-Siam relations remained in a state of competing spheres of influence rather than establishing rigid, Western-style national borders initially.

3.2. Balance of Power Theory

To explain the shift in status, the *Balance of Power* theory is applied to analyze how Vietnam and Siam adjusted their military and diplomatic resources to contain one another. According to Waltz (1979),

states in an anarchic system tend to "balance" against any entity that threatens to become a regional hegemon. This research argues that the significant rise of the Nguyen Dynasty under Emperor Minh Mang disrupted the traditional equilibrium, forcing Siam to align with local forces or seek indirect external support. Conversely, as French colonial pressure intensified in Vietnam, the balance of power shifted in favor of Siam, largely due to its rapid adaptation to the emerging international order.

3.3. Geopolitics of Buffer States

The positions of Cambodia and the Lao principalities are examined through *Buffer State Theory*. A state situated between two rival powers often faces the pressure of "dual hegemony," where it must pay tribute to both sides to ensure survival. Chay (1986) argued that regional stability depends on whether the two major powers maintain a consensus regarding the existence of the buffer zone. When Vietnam implemented direct rule (notably the establishment of Tran Tay Thanh), the buffer state logic was violated, leading to total conflict with Siam. The article analyzes the transition from a "traditional buffer zone" to "modern administrative borders" under colonial influence.

3.4. Modernization Theory and Responses to Colonialism

Finally, the framework utilizes the concept of "indigenous agency" in response to external pressures. The shift in status was determined not only by hard power but also by the capacity for administrative and diplomatic reform. Lieberman (2003) suggested that the consolidation of power in Southeast Asian states was heavily influenced by their ability to integrate into global trade and military technology. Siam's choice of flexible diplomacy versus the Nguyen Dynasty's rigid adherence to traditional tributary systems is analyzed as a decisive factor in the status shift during the latter half of the 19th century.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs an interdisciplinary methodological framework, integrating traditional historical methods with modern analytical techniques of international relations to address the shift in geopolitical status between Vietnam and Siam during the 19th century.

4.1. Multi-perspectivity Approach

To avoid unilateral interpretations or nationalist biases, this study adopts a multi-perspectivity

approach. We do not rely solely on official Vietnamese historical records but cross-reference them with Siamese primary sources and Western accounts. This approach allows for an objective reconstruction of historical events, where the strategic intentions of both the Nguyen Dynasty and the Chakri Dynasty are positioned in a state of interaction and mutual critique (Nguyen Van Luan, 2024).

4.2. Comparative Source Analysis

Comparative analysis constitutes the core methodology of this article. We conduct a parallel examination of administrative texts and chronicles:

- **Vietnamese Sources:** Primary focus is placed on the *Veritable Records of Dai Nam* (*Đại Nam Thực lục*), the *Nguyen Dynasty Administrative Archives* (*Châu bản*), and the *Administrative Repertory of the Nguyen Dynasty* (*Hội điển*). These documents provide detailed insights into the administrative logic, mandarin systems, and military decisions of the Hue court (Phan Dai Doan & Nguyen Minh Tuong, 1997).
- **Siamese Sources:** We utilize *The Dynastic Chronicles, Bangkok Era* (Thiphakorawong, 1978). Cross-checking timelines and event descriptions (such as the 1833-1834 Siamese-Vietnamese War) clarifies the differences in power discourses between the two sides.
- **Buffer Zone Documents:** The *Quy Hop Documents* (2000) are analyzed to understand the practical linkages between Lao principalities and Vietnam within the geopolitical counterbalance to Siam.

4.3. Historical-Logical and Geopolitical Methods

The paper utilizes the historical method to trace the chronological transformation of events, combined with logical analysis to identify the underlying patterns of status shifts. Furthermore, a geopolitical approach is applied to analyze the significance of spatial factors, such as the Mekong River basin, the coastal gateways of Southern Vietnam, and the mountainous terrains of the Lao-Vietnamese border. Applying Wolters' (1999) "Mandala" theory to field analysis elucidates how power centers interacted within a space devoid of rigid modern boundaries.

4.4. Data Processing and Evaluation Procedures

Data collection and processing involve three main stages:

1. **Screening:** Selecting pivotal events that manifest changes in the balance of forces (major wars,

diplomatic treaties, and mandarin reforms).

2. **Textual Decoding:** Analyzing the language utilized in royal correspondences and memorials to understand the attitudes and self-perceived status of the monarchs (Nguyen Minh Tuong, 2015).
3. **Synthesis and Verification:** Utilizing modern scholarship from international historians (such as Lieberman or Chandler) as independent verification sources to ensure the objectivity of the author's conclusions.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. The Establishment of the "Dual Hegemony" Status (1802 – 1830)

The dawn of the 19th century witnessed a unique historical phenomenon in mainland Southeast Asia: the simultaneous and robust resurgence of the region's two most formidable political entities—the Nguyen Dynasty in Vietnam and the Chakri Dynasty in Siam. After decades of devastating civil wars and external invasions, both nations rapidly restored their national strength through vigorous reconstruction processes. In Vietnam, following the defeat of the Tay Son and the unification of the country in 1802, Emperor Gia Long established a centralized administrative apparatus based on the Confucian model, significantly bolstering military power and extending influence into neighboring territories. Concurrently, in Bangkok, the Chakri Dynasty under the reigns of Rama I and Rama II successfully repelled Burmese incursions and pacified Malay sultanates to the south and Lao principalities to the north. This recovery extended beyond mere military might; it manifested in the restructuring of "circles of power" according to the traditional Mandala model. Hue and Bangkok swiftly emerged as dual regional hubs, attracting tributary flows from smaller states and laying the foundation for a new regional order predicated on a balance of power between these two entities.

During the initial period from 1802 to approximately 1820, Vietnam-Siam relations were deeply colored by cordiality and personal gratitude. The unique bond between Emperor Gia Long and King Rama I was forged during Gia Long's years in exile in Bangkok while seeking support against the Tay Son. This profound mutual understanding and personal indebtedness facilitated a "special diplomacy" mechanism, allowing both nations to avoid direct conflict despite their simultaneous expansion. However, beneath this veneer of friendship lay an intense clandestine competition for influence over strategic buffer zones, particularly

Cambodia (Chan Lap) and the Lao principalities. For both courts, controlling these buffers was not merely a matter of economic gain or prestige but a vital necessity for national security. This competition operated subtly through the co-opting of local chieftains, the granting of seals of office, and the acceptance of tribute, keeping the buffer regions in a constant state of "dual vassalage."

The existence of this "Dual Hegemony" model, while providing temporary stability, was inherently volatile and unsustainable in the long term. The fundamental cause lay in the process of administrative centralization that both nations were aggressively pursuing. When Emperor Minh Mang ascended the throne in Vietnam, he intensified reforms to transition from a loose Mandala model to a Sinitic-style centralized state, exerting direct control over territories rather than governing through vassals. This directly clashed with the expansionist logic of Siam, which was similarly modernizing its military and consolidating control over the Mekong River basin. The traditional Mandala model, characterized by soft boundaries and symbolic loyalty, became obsolete as regional powers began seeking absolute administrative and territorial control. The collision of these two centralized wills in the buffer zones transformed covert competition into direct confrontation, terminating the brief period of amity and plunging the region into a new cycle of conflict.

5.2. Conflict Escalation and the Zenith of Nguyen Power (1830 – 1847)

The period from 1830 to 1847 marked a definitive transition from covert competition to overt and comprehensive confrontation between Vietnam and Siam, plunging the mainland Southeast Asian regional order into its most violent cycle of the 19th century. This escalation originated from the hegemonic ambitions of the Nguyen Dynasty under Emperor Minh Mang, who sought to establish a regional order that directly counterbalanced the expansionist efforts of the Chakri Dynasty in Bangkok. The crux of this confrontation lay in two strategic theaters: Cambodia and the Lao principalities. The Siamese-Vietnamese Wars of 1833-1834 and 1841-1845 were not merely military campaigns but served as rigorous tests of each power's ability to mobilize resources and assert legitimacy within these buffer zones. Specifically, administrative documents within the *Quy Hop Records* reveal a sophisticated strategy of penetration by the Hue court into Upper Laos and Western frontier regions. By establishing administrative

systems, collecting taxes, and receiving tribute from local chieftains in areas such as Sam Neua and Tran Ninh, the Nguyen Dynasty created a geopolitical "pincer" designed to encircle Siam from the west, thereby asserting its dominant position within the regional Mandala system.

The resurgence of Vietnamese power reached its zenith with the implementation of direct rule in Cambodia, epitomized by the establishment of Tran Tay Thanh in 1835. Moving beyond the traditional protectorate model, Emperor Minh Mang attempted to impose Vietnamese administrative structures, culture, and Confucian education directly onto the region. Transforming a vassal kingdom into a formal administrative province of Vietnam represented a bold strategic move, signifying a determination to eliminate the buffer zone entirely in favor of a direct administrative border with Siam. During this phase, Vietnam ascended to a position of absolute administrative and military superiority in the Mekong basin. The prowess of the Nguyen military, coupled with an extensive network of garrisons, forced Siam into a defensive posture, necessitating a shift from direct assault to supporting local insurrections intended to undermine Hue's control. The creation of Tran Tay Thanh was not only a territorial milestone but also a symbol of the Nguyen Dynasty's effort to actualize its "Tianxia" (All-under-Heaven) ideal, where Vietnam's status was affirmed as a central power guiding neighboring states into the orbit of Confucian civilization.

However, this peak status incurred an exorbitant "cost of power" that the Hue court was ultimately forced to bear. Maintaining a cumbersome administrative bureaucracy and a permanent military presence in Tran Tay Thanh exhausted the national treasury and placed immense pressure on logistical systems. Persistent indigenous uprisings in Cambodia, fueled by Siamese clandestine support, transformed the region into a strategic "quagmire" for the Nguyen army. From a geopolitical perspective, the over-concentration on the western front diminished the court's vigilance and preparedness regarding threats from the east, specifically French colonial encroachments. This entrapment in Cambodia not only depleted material resources but also caused strategic fractures within the imperial court regarding foreign policy. By the time Emperor Thieu Tri ascended the throne and was compelled to withdraw troops from Tran Tay Thanh in 1847 to seek a compromise with Siam, Vietnam's regional dominance had begun to fracture. This exhaustion was a secondary factor that left Vietnam in a passive state when French colonial forces

invaded Da Nang in 1858, marking the end of an era of indigenous hegemony and ushering in Western colonial dominance.

5.3. The Shift in Geopolitical Status amid Colonial Impact (1847 – Late 19th Century)

The latter half of the 19th century marked a decisive turning point in the history of Vietnam-Siam relations, as the regional order transitioned from a competition between two indigenous powers to one dominated by Western colonial intervention. The shift in status between the two nations during this period was deeply rooted in divergent diplomatic ideologies and their respective capacities to adapt to the emerging international system. While the Nguyen Dynasty under Emperor Tu Duc persisted with a "closed-door" policy and remained rigidly committed to a Confucian worldview, Siam, under the reigns of Kings Mongkut (Rama IV) and Chulalongkorn (Rama V), underwent a spectacular transformation. The diplomatic mindset of the Hue court remained anchored in the traditional tributary system and local defensive capabilities, leading to a profound lack of information regarding global dynamics and a sluggish response to French military advancements. Conversely, Siam recognized early the impending collapse of the old Mandala order and proactively adopted Western administrative and diplomatic techniques. Bangkok's flexibility was manifested not only in opening trade but also in its ability to navigate the rivalry between Britain and France, utilizing diplomacy as a shield to preserve national sovereignty (Nguyen Van Luan, 2024).

The disintegration of traditional buffer zones provided the clearest evidence of the collapse of Vietnam's geopolitical standing relative to Siam. The French invasion of Cochinchina and the establishment of a protectorate over Cambodia starting in 1863 directly stripped the Nguyen Dynasty of its leading role in the Mekong basin. Vietnam, which had previously implemented direct rule in Tran Tay Thanh, faced the erosion of its own southern territories. Meanwhile, Siam demonstrated an exceptionally shrewd strategy of "concessionary diplomacy." Rather than engaging in a direct confrontation that risked total colonization, Bangkok chose to cede peripheral territories in Laos and Cambodia to France in exchange for maintaining core sovereignty within the Chao Phraya basin. According to Lieberman (2003), this represented a transition from the "blurred boundaries" of the Mandala to Western-style "administrative borders." By accepting the loss of its spheres of influence in the Mekong, Siam avoided total colonization, whereas

Vietnam gradually lost its diplomatic autonomy through the successive treaties of 1862, 1874, and 1884 (The Nguyen Dynasty Historical Bureau, 2002).

In discussing Siam's success in shifting its status, it is evident that the nation evolved from being a "counterweight to Vietnam" to becoming the only internationally recognized "buffer state" between the British and French empires. This shift was significantly more modern in its geopolitical logic than that of the Hue court. Siam did not merely rely on geographical luck; it proactively created a security space where both Britain and France found it more advantageous to maintain an independent Siam than to risk a direct confrontation between their empires in Southeast Asia. This aligns with Chay's (1986) theory of buffer states, where stability is maintained through a balance between external powers. Vietnam, unable to break free from the tributary system's orbit and lacking substantive international allies, became an outpost for French expansion, thereby completely losing its status within the regional order. The decline of the Nguyen Dynasty's power was not merely a military defeat but a failure to reposition the nation within a rapidly changing world order (Phan Dai Doan & Nguyen Minh Tuong, 1997).

By the end of the 19th century, the balance of power in mainland Southeast Asia had completely tilted toward Siam as the sole surviving independent state. Vietnam's status had been supplanted by the French colonial administration within the Indochinese Union. This shift not only concluded the centuries-long Vietnam-Siam competition but also established a new geopolitical reality, where national borders were defined by colonial treaties rather than the loyalties of local chieftains. Examining this period through the records of Thiphakorawong (1978) and Siamese dynastic chronicles reveals a stark contrast in the ability to modernize administrative apparatuses and defensive thinking. The lessons from this status shift remain profoundly relevant for understanding the survival and development of middle powers amidst great-power competition (Wolters, 1999).

5.4. General Assessment of the Geopolitical Status Shift

The shift in geopolitical status between Vietnam and Siam during the 19th century was not merely a change in military power or territorial influence; it represented a profound transformation in the nature of power: from the traditional Mandala model to the modern nation-state with rigid borders. For centuries, the regional order of mainland Southeast

Asia operated through the Mandala system—where central authority radiated toward peripheries through cultural influence, religious charisma, and the symbolic loyalty of local chieftains. However, the rise of the Nguyen Dynasty with its strong administrative centralization and the modernization efforts of the Chakri Dynasty gradually dismantled this structure. The adoption of direct rule by the Hue court, exemplified by the establishment of formal administrative units in buffer zones like Tran Tay Thanh or the Lao principalities—as documented in the *Quy Hop Records*—marked the replacement of "soft cultural influence" with "hard administrative management." Power was no longer measured by the personal fealty of minor kings but by the presence of a bureaucratic apparatus, taxation systems, and a unified legal code extending from the center to the frontiers (Nguyen Minh Tuong, 2015).

This process had a constitutive impact on the modern political map of Southeast Asia, as the 19th-century power race between Vietnam and Siam became the primary factor in shaping the contemporary borders of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Strategic buffer zones that once existed in states of "dual vassalage" were forced to choose sides or were partitioned to become part of the formal administrative space of one of the two indigenous powers before being codified by colonial treaties. Research by Nguyen Van Luan (2024) indicates that the expansionist and defensive efforts of the Nguyen Dynasty in the Mekong basin were not only aimed at territorial aggrandizement but also created the legal and field precedents that the French later inherited to define the borders of Indochina. Similarly, Siam's shrewdness in executing strategic retreats from its spheres of influence in Laos and Cambodia to consolidate its core territory helped form a modern Thai nation-state with boundaries more clearly defined than ever before. The collision of these two political wills transformed the ambiguous frontiers of the Mandala model into the determined administrative borders of the international geopolitical map (Lieberman, 2003).

From a long-term perspective, this status shift also reflects the divergent adaptations of two political systems under the pressures of the era. While Vietnam sought to resolve status issues through deep administrative penetration and the maintenance of a Confucian order, Siam shifted toward internationalizing its national standing through treaties with Western powers. Consequently, although both nations contributed significantly to the regional configuration, Siam was more successful in preserving its core sovereignty by accepting the loss

of peripheral territories. The 19th-century Vietnam-Siam competition is, therefore, not just a historical chapter of conflict but the bedrock of modern Southeast Asian geopolitics. Today, these nations continue to inherit the legacies of borders and spheres of influence that were fundamentally shaped by the military campaigns and administrative policies of two centuries ago (Wolters, 1999).

6. CONCLUSION

The study of the shift in geopolitical status between Vietnam and Siam during the 19th century allows for systematic conclusions regarding the transformation of the regional order in mainland Southeast Asia on the eve of the colonial era. In summary, the 19th century was not merely a period of binary military conflict but a process of redefining power and the existential space of the region's two most formidable political entities. Beginning with the promising "Dual Hegemony" model during the eras of Gia Long and Rama I, this relationship rapidly evolved into a comprehensive confrontation as the requirements for administrative centralization became the paramount priority for both courts. The resurgence of the Nguyen Dynasty, culminating in the effort to impose a Confucian order and direct rule in Cambodia via Tran Tay Thanh, affirmed an ambition to establish a distinct "Tianxia" system, with Vietnam serving as the civilizational and power center (Nguyen Van Luan, 2024). However, this zenith of power contained the seeds of exhaustion, as the exorbitant cost of maintaining buffer zones eroded national resources before facing the Western challenge.

Another critical conclusion drawn from this research is the decisive role of diplomatic ideology and strategic adaptability in shaping national status. The contrast between the Nguyen Dynasty's "closed-door" policy and the flexibility of the Chakri Dynasty created two divergent geopolitical fates by the late 19th century. Siam, by proactively transitioning from the Mandala influence model to the modern buffer state concept, succeeded in internationalizing its sovereignty amidst British and French rivalry. Conversely, Vietnam, by remaining tethered to traditional power structures and failing to anticipate maritime threats, gradually lost its autonomy and was ultimately integrated into the colonial system. This process demonstrates that geopolitical status is not a fixed constant but the result of continuous interaction between internal strength and the ability to navigate emerging international rules (Phan Dai Doan & Nguyen Minh Tuong, 1997). The loss of spheres of influence in the Mekong basin was not

only a territorial forfeit but signaled the end of a regional order led by indigenous powers.

The long-term impact of the 19th-century Vietnam-Siam power race was the foundational laying of the modern Southeast Asian political map. Today's borders between Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand are largely legacies of the partitions of influence and "hard" administrative management efforts from two centuries ago. The examination of administrative texts such as the *Quy Hop Records* or the *Veritable Records of Dai Nam* shows that the Nguyen Dynasty exerted significant effort to transform ambiguous frontiers into tightly controlled administrative units, creating the precursors for later nation-state territorial formation (Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2000; The Nguyen Dynasty Historical Bureau, 2002). Despite Vietnam's period of colonization, the imprints of administration and boundaries established during the Minh Mang era remain vital in asserting territorial sovereignty and identity. The status shift from a hegemonic regional

power to a colonized state, and finally to a modern independent nation, represents a historical progression of immense hardship yet remarkable national resilience.

Ultimately, this research affirms that 19th-century Vietnam-Siam relations offer profound lessons in statecraft and geopolitical vision. A nation's success or failure in maintaining its status depends not only on military might but on its capacity to interpret the era and remain flexible in international alliances. The legacy of the 19th-century power race persists in contemporary regional diplomatic and cooperative relations, reminding us of the importance of maintaining balance and mutual understanding among middle powers in a multipolar world. The documentary and theoretical contributions of this study hope to open new avenues for international scholars in viewing Southeast Asian history, where indigenous powers once made extraordinary efforts to construct order and assert their positions on the global map (Wolters, 1999).

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