

Decolonisation of Asia

The decolonisation of Asia was the gradual growth of independence movements in Asia, leading ultimately to the retreat of foreign powers and the creation of a number of nation-states in the region.

There were many catalysts for this process, but the Second World War was the ultimate one.

This article will discuss at length the process of decolonisation of Asia within the context of the IAS Exam.

Asia before the Decolonisation Process

European nations began the process of colonising Asia at the turn of the 16th century. Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama's discovery of a sea route to India on May 20, 1498, heralded the arrival of more European explorers and colonisers.

The Portuguese established a permanent base of operation in Malacca in 1511 and by 1565 Spain had begun its own venture in colonialism through its conquest of the Philippines in 1565.

The 17th century saw the arrival of more Europeans such as the Dutch, British and the French as Portuguese and Spanish fortunes began to decline due to upheavals back home. The Dutch would take over some of the old-Portuguese colonies on South-East Asia and even expanding beyond to include most of present-day Indonesia and establishing trade links with Japan and China.

The British would fight Portuguese presence in India and other parts of Asia beginning in the 17th century and by the mid-19th century, it held most of India through the East India Company along with Burma, Malaya and Singapore. Following the Revolt of 1857, the East India Company was dissolved and Queen Victoria was declared Empress of India, thus bringing India under direct administration of the British crown.

The French had little success in India and were driven out of the subcontinent in their entirety following their defeat in the Carnatic Wars. Only Mahe and Pondichery would be French enclaves until decolonisation. However, they were successful in establishing colonies further east. They had lucrative colonies based in and around the region of Indochina (Modern-day Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos).

Europeans were the only one to venture into colonialist expeditions. An industrialised Japan colonised Taiwan in 1874 and in an imperialistic fervour that matched the Europeans, it invaded Korea in 1910.

The United States entered the region in 1898 during the Spanish–American War, taking the Philippines as its sole colony through a mock battle in the capital and the purchase of the Philippines from Spain after the declaration of independence and the First Philippine Republic.

Retreat from Imperialism and Colonialism in Asia

World War II created opportunities for communism, but above all, it sounded the death knell for colonialism. The South-East Asian colonies were overrun by the Japanese in the initial years of the war, severely weakening European colonial powers when they would return after the end of the war.

Now upon the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, the colonial authorities were seeking to reclaim their holdings. The nationalists who fought for independence were unwilling to return to colonial dependence. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union was willing to tolerate the survival of unreformed imperialism.

Only the British Empire, one of the major victors in 1945, survived relatively intact, and it was here, paradoxically, that the greatest concession was extracted in the post-war decade.

In India, the war years ended the brief experiment in partial self-government begun in 1937. The national Congress referred to participate in the war effort on the grounds that they had not been consulted about India's declaration of war on Germany. Congress began the Quit India campaign which led to their arrest and imprisonment. By the end of the war, it was clear that a rising nationalist movement would not enable the British to hold on to India on pre-war terms.

A broad Muslim movement, backed by a 1940 League of Nations resolution approving a separate state for India's Islamic population, called for a partition. The Indian National Congress eventually agreed and two states - Pakistan and India - were granted independence on 14 and 15 August 1947 respectively.

In Britain's other Asian possession there was a threat from nationalists and communists, inspired by Mao Tse Tung's example in China. In Malaya, a long counter-insurgency war (known as the Malayan Emergency) defeated the communists but brought the more moderate nationalists elements independence in 1957. In Burma, which had been occupied by the Japanese and granted a puppet government, British rule was violently rejected and independence was granted in 1948.

The French and Dutch faced the same problems in the Far East. The Netherlands never regained the control of the Dutch Indies after the Japanese defeat and independence were formally achieved in 1949. France attempted to pursue a strategy of assimilation with the metropolitan power, or the granting of associated status, to remove the stigma of colonial control.

French rule was nonetheless rejected in Indo-China. The resorted administration in Vietnam found itself in a head-on confrontation with a mass communist and nationalist movement.

Military defeat in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu persuaded French leaders to abandon their Far Eastern Empire altogether. The victory, however, would be a prelude to the long-term involvement of Cold War powers that would culminate in the Vietnam War (1965 - 1976). The last colonial holding in Asia, Hong Kong, was transferred to China in 1997.

Timeline of Decolonisation of Asia

The table below gives details about the independence of Asian colonies post-1945.

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Name	Date of Independence
Brunei	January 1 1984
Cambodia	November 9 1953
Hong Kong	July 1 1997
India	15 August 1947
Indonesia	December 27 1949
Israel	May 14 1948
Laos	October 22 1953
Malaysia	September 16 1963
Maldives	July 26 1965
Myanmar	January 4, 1948
Singapore	August 31 1963
Sri Lanka	February 4 1948