43 Geographies of power in the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore Growth Triangle

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INTRODUCTION

> Given the complexity and specificity of both the global and the national, their interlacing suggests the existence of frontier zones – from the perspective of research and theorization, these analytic borderlands are sure to require independent theoretical and methodological specificity.
>
> (Sassen, 2000, p. 216)

While Saskia Sassen and others have made many such arguments about the theoretical and methodological specificity demanded in studying the frontier zones of the global and national, there have been fewer examples provided of how to try and do this in practice. As we have argued elsewhere (e.g. Sidaway, 2002; Bunnell, 2004; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007; Sparke, 2009a and 2005), treating frontiers and borderlands as metaphors for other less spatial forms of intermixing runs the risk of ignoring critical geographies that profoundly shape how the global and national are interlaced. By way of an alternative, we chart some of the geographical specificities of the regional reterritorialization exemplified by the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore (IMS) borderlands (see Figure 43.1). Globally promoted as a Growth Triangle since the latter part of the 1980s, this cross-border region illustrates how the frontiers of the global and the national that pre-occupy so many theorists of globalization, global cities and so-called deterritorialization remain nonetheless sites in which spatial relations and territorial formations are particularly pertinent to explaining power relations. We sketch a complex regional geography of power relations that counterpoints the simplified trigonometry of the Triangle concept and contradicts attendant arguments about its embodiment of borderless world dynamics. Whereas Sassen's own critique of borderless world discourses underlined a need to examine an emerging 'geography of centrality' instantiated in world cities (Sassen, 1998), here we address the geographies of peripherality that in turn complicate decontextualized and ageographical accounts of world cities, city-regions and growth triangles as the simple spatial correlates of globalization and denationalization (Olds and Yeung, 2004; Sparke, 2009b).

The political commitment to tie together Singapore with the Malaysian state of Johor (sometimes romanized as Johore) and the Riau islands (principally Batam and Bintan) of Indonesia in the triangular relationship was formally constituted in a memorandum of understanding between the three states signed in Johor Bahru (Malaysia) on 17 December 1994. However, the project had a longer administrative history going back at least as far as the proposals of Singapore's Economic Development Board in the late 1980s that were made public by Singapore's Deputy

Figure 43.1 The Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore Growth Triangle in Southeast Asia

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in December 1989 (Ahmad, 1993, p. 93). The basic vision was for Singapore to more effectively manage the cross-border hinterlandization of its economy, providing capital and strategic direction while securing access to the Malaysian supply of labour, semi-developed land and water, and while also accessing an abundant supply of undeveloped land and low-skilled Indonesian labour in Riau. Singapore, in short, was to supply the capital, and Johor and Riau were to provide the land and labour.

The vision of economic complementarity articulated in these proposals underpinned tall tales of anticipated cross-border regional growth. In ways that represented a contemporary simulation of Alfred Weber's simple triangular model of industrial location, the Asian Development Bank and other promotional groups scripted the Triangle as a three-way complementarity of capital, labour and land, an 'ideal triangle' of complementarities destined for growth in the midst of borderless trade (see Thant et al., 1994; Abonyi, 1996, p. 5). Moreover, insofar as the Triangle vision was also intended in part to assuage traditional concerns about Singapore's influence in the region, much stress was placed on the two-way reciprocal aspects of the complementarities, and related efforts were subsequently made to downplay Singapore's semiotic dominance in the Triangle with the abandonment of early names and acronyms such as 'the Singapore Growth Triangle' and SIJORI (Singapore–Johor–Riau) which placed Singapore first and signified the reality of Singapore's hegemonic economic role. Thus for both economic and political reasons the theme of economic complementarity became the dominant trope of writing on the region and it was readily rehearsed by academics as much as by policy-makers.

This chapter is by no means the first to deal with such issues. Macleod and McGee (1996) early on pointed out the region's unevenness, arguing that, given the dominance of Singapore and the very limited ties between Johor and Riau, the Triangle is by no means 'equilateral' (see also Grundy-Warr et al., 1999). More recently, in a sustained ethnographic investigation of the experiences of 'development' in Batam, Lindquist (2008) contrasted the formal cross-border Triangle of the business planners and technocrats with the informal links and, more significantly, the many curtailed links of frustrated and exploited migrants. The non-equilateral aspect of the Triangle noted, there is no doubting the economic force of these so-called complementarities. In this region (unlike certain other concept cross-border regions (Sparke, 2000, 2002)) they are more than just a politically influential promotional story. The rent gaps – in terms of 'spatial fix' theory (Harvey, 1981) – are enormous. Land and labour are much cheaper in Johor, and still cheaper on the islands of Batam and Bintan. Such disparities have in turn unleashed all the forces of 'uneven development' (Smith, 1984), creating a classic economic geography of a regional scalar fix – involving transnational corporations (TNCs) and national and sub-national states along the lines of what Swyngedouw calls 'glocalization' (Swyngedouw, 1997). The theoretical challenge, therefore, is to adequately contextualize these economic imperatives and untangle the ways in which they are knotted together with other economic, political and cultural dynamics unfolding in interrelated but differently scaled contexts. In what follows, we consider them first in terms of capital and then in terms of land and labour.

CAPITAL

The Spatial Fix

Cost differentials between the three parts of the Triangle have had significant economic consequences. As *The Economist* surmised back in 1991, they have allowed Singaporean capital to escape the spatial limits and high costs of the island city-state by expanding to neighbouring parts of Malaysia and Indonesia. The peak of the Triangle investment hype was in the early 1990s when Singapore was booming with growth rates of 12.3 per cent in 1993 and 11.4 per cent in 1994, when unemployment was down between 1.7 per cent and 2.7 per cent, when skilled labour was in short supply, and when wages were rising (see Cunningham and Debrah, 1995; *Singapore Statistics*, 2003a). At the same time, new productive outlets for capital in Singapore were also increasingly limited by land shortages, and limits on water supply systems and other basic resources. These pressures towards reterritorialization were in turn combined with the facilitating capacity of Singapore's highly developed financial sector which was able to play a key role in financing developments in Johor, Batam and enclaves of Bintan (Guinness, 1992).

When the 1997–8 'Asian' financial crisis hit, the supposedly complementary quality of these patterns became increasingly eclipsed by rising concerns about competition (see Debrah et al., 2000). Unemployment levels in Singapore increased to as much as

4.6 per cent in 1999 and 5.2 per cent in 2002 (*Singapore Statistics*, 2003b), the upward pressure on wages was reduced, and new locales for external expansion elsewhere in Southeast Asia began to look cheaper for those holding US dollar-pegged Singapore dollars. In this new context, it was not entirely surprising that interest in local cross-border developments diminished. Overall, this uneven temporal development pattern of decline following expansion makes manifest the links between the growth of the Triangle and the ups and downs of the Singaporean economy. At least at this very extensive level, the pattern does seem to follow the classic spatial fix thesis, with reterritorialization developing in concert with the peaking of the high-growth/high-costs phase of the Singaporean business cycle. However, this bigger picture of a regional spatial fix needs to be nuanced by an acknowledgement of its uneven development on the ground.

While the significance of the developments for Singapore as a global city is not great in the economic aggregate (Rimmer, 1994, p. 1745), the same cannot be said of Johor and still less of Batam and Bintan. In Johor the state government had actively sought twinning with Singapore ever since 1988, and even before this the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority and the Singapore Economic Development Board had cooperated on facilitating cross-border industrial relocation and tourism development projects (Guinness, 1992; Parsonage, 1992). The Malaysian enthusiasm to engage with Singapore in this way (despite ongoing political tensions) was itself indicative of the potentially large amounts of Singaporean capital inflow that were possible. In 1988, as the prospect of the Triangle was being formulated, this inflow increased dramatically by 200 per cent (Parsonage, 1992, p. 309). With the consolidation of the official vision of the Triangle, these flows continued apace, and became part of a phenomenal period of growth for Johor which averaged GDP growth rates above 9 per cent through all of the 1990s up until the 1997 financial crisis. 'Within one decade Johor had developed into a largely export-oriented industrial economy. Manufacturing grew at about 14 per cent annually' (Van Grunsven, 1998, p. 184).

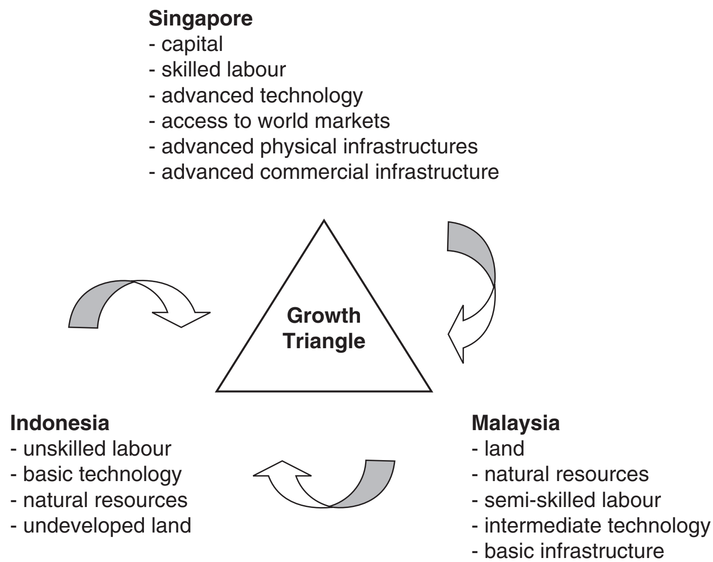
In Batam even more striking rates of growth were recorded during the 1990s. Again, the developments started before Goh Chok Tong's announcement of the 'Triangle of growth'. Back in 1978 the control of development in Batam was transferred to BIDA (the Batam Industrial Development Authority) under the chairmanship of B.J. Habibie (who went on to become President of Indonesia in the wake of Suharto's fall after the 1998 crisis). Habibie turned Batam into both a personal power base and a commercial-cum-national project of building an Indonesian mega-metropolis to vie with Singapore. Clearly, although the island is now home to over 500 foreign companies and its population had grows to 781,000 by 2009 (Azis, 2010), Batam is not even close to rivalling the levels of investment and urban development prized by Singapore. However, the plans that Habibie did make to invest in Batam and turn it into a duty free trade zone have led to remarkably rapid industrial development (Grundy-Warr et al., 1999). In 1990 private investment in the island reached US$2199 million per year, and by 1996 the same figure had more than doubled to US$4704 million (Van Grunsven, 1998, p. 189 (based on BIDA data)). Although it fell back in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis to US$2818 million in 2000, by 2009 annual FDI had doubled again to US$5244 million (Azis, 2010). Eight industrial estates were completed during this time, amongst them the flagship project of Batamindo Industrial Park in the middle of the island that came to boast as tenants a host of TNCs including AT&T, CIBA Vision, Epson, Philips, Quantum, Sumitomo, Smith Corona, Seagate, Sanyo, Shimano, Siemens, TEAC and Thomson.

These global corporations noted, the bulk of the investment in Batamindo has nevertheless originated in Singapore. The same is true of the island as a whole, and in December 2000, BIDA documents recorded over $US 10 billion of investment from Singapore-based corporations, followed next by Japanese originated investment at just over $US 42 million (BIDA, 2000, p. 25). A decade later in 2009, 71.4 per cent of the investment in Batam still came from Singapore (Azis, 2010). Also indicative of the dependency of much of this development on Singaporean interest, 40 per cent of the joint venture ownership of Batamindo came from two Singapore government-linked companies (Grundy-Warr et al., 1999, p. 310). In parallel with these investments, Bintan island also became witness to the transformative influx of capital from Singapore. The same backers of Batamindo went on to create the Bintan Industrial Estate at Lobam and a consortium of Singaporean and Indonesian firms jointly developed the 'Bintan Beach International Resort' as a manicured tourist enclave in the north of the island (Bunnell et al., 2006; Hampton, 2010). Repeated articulation of the cost contrasts that drove these developments has effectively constituted a discourse of complementarity.

The Discourse of Complementarity

The performance of this discourse can be examined as a classic promotional form of geoeconomics. Analytically, it has led to the easy insertion of the Triangle as an example into broader discourses on growth triangles and cross-border regions as emerging global trends (e.g. Kumar, 1994; Wiemer, 2009, who draws lessons from Sijori for the Greater Mekong Sub-Region in a report commissioned by the Asian Development Bank). The hype around the region as a perfect embodiment of differential factor endowments nested around an easily accessible world city hub in Singapore speaks in this way to a larger set of comparisons: namely the comparisons made amongst the Singapore Economic Development Board and other local business elites that the region needs to position itself more competitively vis-à-vis other rival investment hubs in Asia. The diagramming of the Triangle based on the discourse of complementarity (see Figure 43.2) can thus be interpreted as doing the argumentative work of promoting the place of the Triangle amidst a wider geoeconomic competition for inward investment.

More recently Singapore has moved forward with other geoeconomic strategies for entrenching its brand of embedded exportism, including through a bilateral free trade deal with the US. Commentary in the Singapore *Business Times* drew out the place promotional demonstration point that 'the [Free Trade Agreement] should help re-focus investor attention on Singapore' (21 November 2003). To this it also added an open acknowledgement of the specific spectres of comparison driving the need to refocus: 'With north-east Asia – and China in particular – rising, Singapore is in danger of dropping out of the radar screen.' In these kinds of comments and comparisons the geoeconomics of place promotion through the Triangle have been harnessed to the new demonstration effect of bilateral free trade. But the performance has a very material side, too. Key products made in Batam and Bintan have been classified in the free trade agreement as subject to the same tariff reductions as those made in Singapore itself. Thus, for



Source: redrawn after Debrah et al. (2000)

Figure 43.2 The Triangle of Economic Complementarity

the purposes of the bilateral deal with the US, the borderless economy of appearances of the Triangle has become real: Batam-made and Bintan-made goods are treated by the US as if they actually originated in Singapore. As a result of the cost savings made available by Riau export processing, it is therefore again argued that 'Singaporean enterprises are better placed to compete against regional rivals' (Dhume and Saywell, 2002, p. 22). If such comments reveal the salience of the cost comparisons on both of the levels we have been discussing in this section – both in terms of the actual economic geography of export processing and the place promotional geoeconomics – they also underline once more the direct links and material fusions that result in practice. Thus in some sense, the bilateral free trade deal returns us to the place from which we began: the comparative geography of cost disparities. But we have not entirely turned full circle insofar as our argument has along the way introduced questions about the representation of the landscape of the Triangle and the politics of labour; themes that we take up next.

LAND AND LABOUR

The neat triangulation of complementarity conjoining Singapore's capital with Johor and Riau's land and labour not only licenses the geoeconomic landscaping of the Triangle as a place of borderless opportunity, it also overwrites and obscures a great deal of history, geopolitics and struggle (Bunnell et al., 2006). Today, this history of struggle continues to remain active and stirs just beneath the surface of the landscape, and any attention to land and labour brings it abruptly back into the story of triangular capital flows.

Another of Singapore's strategies for securing its growth trajectory – land reclamation – has further roiled relations with Malaysia and increased the geopolitical tensions. Land reclamation in Singapore began in 1962 with the creation of 0.2 sq km of new useable land for state housing development along the east coast. Much larger areas have since been reclaimed for infrastructure projects, most notably 11.6 sq km for various phases of Changi International Airport and the joining of seven islands off the south-west of the island to form Jurong Island for a vast petrochemical complex. In total, reclamation projects have resulted in Singapore growing from a land area of 580 sq km at independence to more than 710 sq km today. Over the past decade, this has repeatedly raised fears in Malaysia that Singapore's gains are Malaysia's and Indonesia's losses. With the sand, the raw material for the land being 'reclaimed', being removed from Indonesian and Malaysian territory and waters, the geography of land reclamation seemed to make explicit a zero-sum form of one-sided growth that the cant of complementarity in the Triangle was supposed to transcend. In 2002, the Malaysian cabinet announced that licences for the export of sand would not be renewed as the material was needed for Malaysia's own growth through reclamation. Two years later, when the issue arose again, those shifting sand to Singapore were described in the Malay language press in Malaysia as 'selling (out)' the nation (*menjual maruah negara*, lit. 'selling the pride of the nation') (*Utusan Malaysia*, 10 March 2002).

Such nationalistic responses account in large part for a two-decade-long impasse over land in Singapore occupied by the Malayan Railway (KTMB – Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad) which the Singapore authorities wish to develop. It came as something of a surprise, then, when Singapore Premier Lee Hsien Loong and his Malaysian counterpart Najib Tun Razak reached an agreement on the railway land on 24 May 2010, in a deal which also included Singapore involvement in the Iskandar Malaysia township project in southern Johor. It is revealing that two Singapore-based political commentators expressed surprise that 'the KTMB deal did not bring about any new stirring of anti-Singapore sentiment in Malaysia' (Segaran and Pasuni, 2010, p. 2). The potential for further conflict remains however, including in the Iskander Malaysia project where there is evidence of competition as well as collaboration with Singapore (Wiemer, 2009).

Unsurprisingly, similar concerns come together with the spectres of comparison around direct economic competition, too. Thus *Utusan Malaysia* reports in 2002 both expressed and fuelled fears that Singapore's continued territorial growth plans threatened Johor's economic expansion. Reclamation projects around Pulau Tekong (northeast of Singapore) were reportedly resulting in a narrowing of the channel between the two countries (the Tebrau Straits), impacting upon ships' entry to Johor's eastern port at Pasir Gudang. More significantly given the heightened container port competition, reclamation on the west side of Singapore at Tuas was claimed to have narrowed access to Tanjung Pelepas Port. An area the size of ten football pitches around Tuas had been reclaimed using Indonesian sand from Riau, thus completing the decidedly asymmetrical triangulation (*Utusan Malaysia*, 10 March 2002). The English language Malaysian daily *New Straits Times* suggested that Singapore's growth plans were tantamount to economic sabotage of Johor: 'State authorities worry that the landfills have been cleverly designed to obstruct the smooth operations of Tanjung Pelepas Port, which is seen as a viable alternative to Singapore' (*New Straits Times*, 5 March 2002). Finally, it should be noted that the controversy over sand shipments itself became triangular with the Indonesian government reportedly giving authority to its navy to shoot and sink dredging barges illegally carrying sand from Riau to Singapore (*New Straits Times*, 3 July 2003). Seven years on, the theme cropped up again, with allegations of corruption chains involved in mining and shipping sand that found its way from islands of the Riau archipelago (some of which now had all their sandy soil stripped away) to building sites in Singapore. A recent article in the British newspaper *The Telegraph* (12 February 2010) notes that Singapore is being accused of launching 'Sand Wars'. The article quotes Nur Hidayati of Greenpeace Indonesia: 'It is a war for natural resources that is being fought secretly. The situation has reached critical levels and the tropical islands of Nipah, the Karimun Islands and many small islands off the coast of Riau are shrinking dramatically and are on the brink of disappearing into the sea.'

The tensions involved in the recent retriangulations of postcolonial land development are still more painfully evident in the landscapes of labour in the Triangle. In Batam, for example, the order of the official development schemes is everywhere flouted by the so-called *rumah liar* (literally, 'wild housing') settlements that represent the uncontrolled labour inflows onto the island. In much of Batam, striking juxtapositions proliferate, with smart (but very often half-empty) new housing standing right next to sprawling self-built *rumah liar*. Even around the perimeters of the tightly regulated (and multiply fenced) Batamindo Industrial Park, there are numerous ad hoc *rumah liar* built by migrants from all over Indonesia seeking opportunities in Batam. Many have been moved to make way for a reservoir and more industrial estates, and yet new settlements develop just as quickly, creating a series of stark juxtapositions between the manicured and controlled spaces of the estates and the workers' dormitories, nearby gated real estate developments (marketed to selected wealthy Indonesians and Singaporeans) and, around their edges, the sprawls of shanty housing, shops and services made out of corrugated iron sheets, planks and other improvised building materials.

Nonetheless, business spokespersons from Batam and Bintan are publicly voicing concerns that Chinese labour undercuts that in the Growth Triangle. At a recent meeting on the prospects for the Growth Triangle, a businessman from Bintan complained that the Batam Bintan Karimun free trade zone ('BBK FTZ' in the new vernacular – established by Indonesia public Law No. 44 in 2007) was never going to be able to compete well with Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in China, because there was still not a sufficiently pro-business climate and the full spectrum of 'freedoms' associated with SEZs! 'When will a SEZ be fully realized?' he asked to much applause (notes from a meeting on the Growth Triangle held at the Traders Hotel, Singapore in March 2010): 'We need to catch up with the others in China. We are losing out and losing companies. We need tax holidays, tax concessions, and labour rules to be reset so the region can really compete in the world' (more applause from the Traders Hotel room). Another audience member at the meeting complained about the annoyance of having to renegotiate wage deals with labour unions in Batam and Bintan thanks to a new Indonesian law giving more rights to workers, and while Harry Azhar Azis, the Minister from Jakarta, diplomatically described a responsibility to balance labour wishes with management freedoms, a representative from Batam's Chamber of Commerce, Indina Fajar, more directly emphasized that: 'we are working so hard to sustain the cheap wage of the labour and to keep it a more conducive environment for business' (notes from a meeting held at Traders Hotel, Singapore in March 2010).

Others at the meeting talked about the long term dream of building a bridge from Singapore to Batam and Bintan. This, however, is not on the cards for the foreseeable future, for the 20–odd kilometres of water of the Selat Singapura now provide a convenient and relatively controllable barrier (Lindquist, 2008). Capital, tourists, investors and elites can move across it relatively freely: workers cannot. As 'wild' and disruptive as the landscapes of labour migration may appear, they represent a form of disruption that remains for the most part within the Indonesian and, to a much lesser extent, Malaysian corners of the Triangle. Despite the fears about HIV infection, Dengue fever-carrying mosquitoes and crime syndicates moving close to Singapore, the most fundamental feature of the Growth Triangle's labour geography remains – in every sense – in place: namely, that while capital can move relatively freely between Singapore, Johor and Riau, labour cannot. The hundreds of thousands of migrants coming to Batam and Bintan to find work depress wage rates very effectively, but they have little capacity to press over the Strait of Singapore onto the shores of the city-state.

CONCLUSIONS

A host of scholars have critiqued the banalities reproduced by the likes of Kenichi Ohmae about a looming borderless world. Far fewer have sought to examine the complex human geographies of transborder regional formations. This is precisely what we have attempted to do for the IMS Growth Triangle. What we have shown is that the Triangle is not borderless. It is transected by all kinds of divides and disjunctures that in fact represent an explosion of boundary drawing. Moreover, the national boundaries within the Triangle remain significant, not just for managing migrants but also for mediating the development plans such that only those dealing with free trade and investment schemes seem to find quick collaborative consensus. Meanwhile, what economists might call the negative externalities of the Triangle's development, including tensions over water, over migrants, over HIV and over sand dredging and land reclamation, endure. All of these tensions have cross-border ramifications, and what they show is that the economic abstraction of 'borderlessness' is actually instantiated in a complex human geography contoured by polymorphous problems and power relations which cannot be understood, let alone addressed adequately, in the geometric terms of the Triangle.

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