
CORRESPONDENCE.

SUMATRA.

To the EDITOR of the PALL MALL GAZETTE.

SIR,—I must confess myself utterly tired of the controversy which it has pleased our political managers, and the press which echoes their personalities, to raise on this subject. I am tired of hearing, in prose and in verse, that Mr. Gladstone's Government have made a treasonable mistake in handing over the Straits of Malacca to the Dutch. I am still more tired of the stereotyped reply, they it was not they, but "the other side," who were guilty of the assumed error or treason. I will venture on a few words on a subject of some, though exaggerated, importance, in which it seems to me more desirable to state the question so far as it affects the interests of our empire, without caring a button whether the result of such statement is favourable to Mr. Gladstone or to Mr. Disraeli.

Sumatra (I am sorry to be forced, for the convenience of my readers, to indulge in a little elementary geography) occupies, with its north-eastern coast, the south-western shore of the Straits of Malacca. The north-eastern shore has been long in our possession, or under our influence. In the year 1824 we exchanged certain possessions of ours, on the continental side of the Straits, against Bencoolen and other possessions owned or claimed by the Dutch on the insular side. Of Siak and other districts on the same shore the Dutch had pretty effective control already. But we coupled this cession on our part with certain restrictions on the Dutch against extending their possessions (namely, those we had ceded, and others, I believe, which the Dutch had before) on the north-eastern coast aforesaid of Sumatra. The convention now in question is understood to have liberated the Dutch from these restrictions. They are at liberty—so at least says Mr. Disraeli—to prosecute schemes of conquest and annexation on their side of the Straits of Malacca. Now, it is perfectly true that the Straits of Malacca are a most important marine thoroughfare, and that to people who argue after the fashion of days now past—people who hold us aggrieved if any flag but the British flies in the remotest corners of the globe—the Malacca "grievance" may appear something tangible and substantial. But let us look a little closer, and get out of the stifling atmosphere of party squabbles into the broad sunlight of the right and the expedient. It is certain that whoever holds the south eastern coasts of the Straits of Malacca may inflict considerable injury on our commerce. It is well known that this tract (where not occupied by legitimate Dutch settlements) was in the possession, or under the control, of semi-barbarous, semi-piratical chieftains. No British statesman, so far as I am aware, has suggested the notion of dispossessing these chieftains, and constituting ourselves (at enormous cost) guardians or masters of the Straits on both sides. If this is not to be done, the choice would seem to lie between the following two expedients. Leave the native Sovereigns or chiefs in possession, prevent the Dutch from interfering (as far as the obligation of treaties allows us to do so), and assume for ourselves, with all its consequences, the office of armed water-bailiffs of the Straits of Malacca. The other alternative is, practically, to hand

over that office to the Dutch. And that is what the convention in question (according to the worst said of it by its enemies) purports to do.

If I am right, then, the question, divested of what lawyers call "fringes," is merely this:—Which is best for our commercial and political interests, that the coast immediately opposite our flourishing and increasing settlements should be in the hands of barbarous Malay tribes, involved in constant warfare, or in the hands of a European nation, civilized and industrious, having a very great stake in the peace and prosperity of its own wealthy colonies—Java included? I cannot, for my own part, conceive any hesitation in answering. No Dutchman, however patriotic, dreams of maintaining his Malayan supremacy against Great Britain if a collision should occur. No nation has done so much with such small means; but there is a near limit to the exertions of a nation so circumstanced. If we had taken the other alternative, and insisted on the jealous exclusion of the Dutch from the Straits, we must, in the interests of civilization, have either "annexed" or "protected;" and we are beginning to know what those attractive phrases really mean. Of course there is a further possible supposition: that the claims of the Dutch, if they are left alone, may be adopted and used by some stronger and more ambitious Power. But this, as it seems to me, is a contingency quite as probable, or more probable, if we excluded the Dutch from the Straits and left them to the native tribes.

I have said nothing about "Atchin," for the simple reason that I do not myself see that the Dutch conquest of Atchin has much to do with our security in the Straits of Malacca. If I am wrong, I beg Mr. Disraeli's pardon.

MALAYAN.