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STRAIT OF MALACCA AND SOUTH CHINA SEA AS CRITICAL SEA LINE OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN EAST TO MIDDLE EAST, AFRICA UP TO EUROPE AND AMERICA CONTINENTS. COULD THE HEGEMONY STAND FOR THE NEXT VICENNUIUM? AN OVERVIEW AND PROGNOSIS

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ABSTRACT

The current hegemony in Strait of Malacca and South China Sea will be remained unchanged for the next decade due to the policy and initiatives being implemented, cost effectiveness not being a burden to industry and alternatives land route is not well established yet. However, as the alternative route such as BRI become matured and more efficient, the current pattern will shift from existing maritime routes to rail-network and land-based pipeline instead. A comprehensive blueprint should be developed, aligning with national goals and ensuring the country is well-positioned to capitalize on emerging opportunities. Such foresight is crucial for Malaysia to navigate the evolving global trade landscape, ensuring continued prosperity and competitiveness for the next vicennium and beyond.

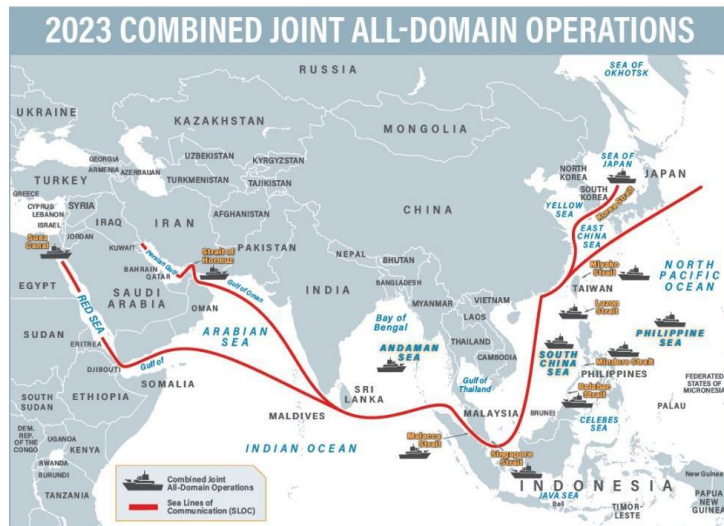
MARITIME ESSEY

“Strait of Malacca and South China Sea as critical sea line of communication between East to Middle East, Africa up to Europe and America continents. Could the hegemony stand for the next vicennium? An overview and prognosis”

Malaysia is a maritime nation, as affirmed by former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamad in his keynote address at the 2019 Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA) and is stipulated in Defence White Paper. As a Maritime nation, Sea Line of Communication (SLOC) plays critical role and function, to ensure healthy, trouble free commercial maritime activity in the routes, particularly in Strait of Malacca and South China Sea. Alfred Thayer Mahan, a maritime strategy guru, quote that those who control the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) will dominate the maritime affairs of that region (Mahan, 1660). Thus the control of these routes allows a nation to exert influence, project power and ensure its security, while denying those capabilities to rivals. Currently, maritime affairs in Strait of Malacca and South China Sea are governed by the respective regional countries, namely Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. Based on the trends of the last decade, India and China have emerged as new economic powers and the significance of SLOC has grown increasingly conspicuous, especially to China. Any disruption to one or more of these crucial routes would severely impact them, particularly if overly dependent on that SLOC. Thus, will this current status quo remain for the next 20 years? And as a maritime nation, what Malaysia need to embark to?

At this juncture, there are 3 main SLOCs in this globe that significantly play a critical lifeline to maritime and commercial activity. First is the Strait of Hormuz which located between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. This vital waterway interlinks the oil-rich regions of the Middle East to international markets. Next, The Malacca Strait, one of the busiest and most important SLOC. It is a narrow waterway between the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra which serve as a major trade route for goods traveling between the Indian Ocean to South China Sea, connecting east and west. The number of vessels pass through the Malacca Strait has significantly increased, based on Marine Electronic Highway (MEH) from the last decade (Higway, 2025). The third SLOC is The Suez Canal, a man-made canal in Egypt which links the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, allowing shorter maritime passage between Europe and Asia without the need to navigate around Cape of Hope, Africa. It is a critical route for global trade, particularly for shipment of goods between Europe, the Middle East and Asia. As these critical SLOC serve as primary arteries for transporting crude oil across the world, disturbance in any of the said routes would lead to substantial impacts on global market due to oil supply interruption and price fluctuation. This could result in a severe supply shortage, particularly in regions that highly dependent on these routes for their energy needs.

Based on Mahan's strategy, whoever manages to dominate these vital SLOC will significantly impact on other parties, particularly in economy spectrum. In other words, countries that control any of the SLOCs would has strategic leverage over global trade, enabling the controlling party to influence on supply-chain and energy supplies, causing significant ripple effects for countries that too dependent on these critical maritime routes. However, controlling these vital SLOCs is not a simple feat; it requires a nation to possess formidable political influence, economic stability and vast resources, including military power. Only a country with such strength can effectively assert dominance over these critical maritime routes and ensure its strategic interests are maintained. Countries like Japan and South Korea face no such concerns, as they align with the existing hegemony and are closely in-tandem with the democratic West. In contrast, for emerging economic powers like China, such challenges pose significant threats to its survival. Any disruption or interference to even one of the SLOCs could jeopardize their economic stability and nation building. The question is whether China will prepare to assert control over these vital maritime routes, if matters arise?



The Three Main SLOCs (Source: *Indopacific Defence Forum*)

For China, this article reckons that command and control complexity due to geographical location, couple up with possibility lacked regional countries support most likely will hamper the strategy to dominate any of the said SLOC. As a result, any inability to assert control could lead to China losing access to these vital maritime routes in the event of any possible conflict. Surprisingly the threat has been identified by China strategies in the 90s. In order to evade this threat, rather than directly dominating control over the SLOCs, China has adopted an alternative strategy and means by pursuing initiatives of not-using existing well-known routes. That unforeseen approach is the development of networks that bypasses sea routes entirely. This masterplan, known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aims to establish a land-based web connecting Europe to Asia, spanning across main continents, East and West. By focusing on land transportation infrastructures, China seeks to create an alternative trade route that reduces dependency on the “easy-to-choke” maritime SLOCs, while simultaneously expanding its economic influence and geopolitical reach across BRI regions. BRI which was launched officially in 2013, currently has garnered participation from 150 countries. The project is steadily advancing toward its completion, encompassing an extensive network of railways, oil and gas pipelines, and modern highways designed as gateways for comprehensive land-based transportation systems. With an anticipated completion date in 2049, the BRI will be a main back-bone for China as an alternative trade network, diminishing its reliance on current sea routes for imports and exports. In 2024, the current trade through BRI was estimated at 3.07 trillion USD (huaxia, n.d.), which is expected to increase to 7.1 trillion USD per annum by 2040.



Belt and Road Initiative (Source: *asiatimes.com*)

As a maritime nation and a key player in the SLOC in South East Asia, Malaysia stands to benefit greatly from strengthening its connectivity to the BRI. Rather than missing out on this development, Malaysia should consider to start integrating into the BRI framework gradually in phases. If shipment cost is favourable, efficient delivery mechanisms, and access to an extensive new network, Malaysia can unlock significant economic opportunities. By embracing this strategic approach, Malaysia could tap into a broader range of markets, enhance trade connectivity and foster sustainable growth across various sectors. The potential benefits include having better infrastructure, increased foreign investment and enhanced regional cooperation. Ultimately, aligning with the BRI initiative would allow Malaysia to diversify its trade routes and solidify its position as a key player in both, maritime and land-based global trade. To date, Malaysia remains unconnected to the BRI as the interconnectivity between the under-construction East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) and the rail networks in Thailand, Laos and China has yet to be completed. While plans are in place to link these networks in the region, the rail connectivity are still under development, hindering Malaysia from harvesting benefits from the said network.

Since the outbreak of the Ukraine-Russia conflict in 2014, Russia has faced significant economic and political sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union. These sanctions included financial restrictions and commodity embargo on Western products. Meanwhile, as the BRI gradually expanded and its network continues to grow, trade through this alternative route has flourished, offering new opportunities for global commerce. This growth has also prompted a shift in global trade landscape, particularly with regards to the use of the US dollar as trade currency. Russia and China, as pioneering members of the initiative, have led the creation of the BRICS block consist of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa as main members which established in 2009 (BRICS, n.d.). The primary goal of BRICS is to promote the use of their own currencies for trade between member nations. This strategy which is labelled by the United State as de-dollarisation movement, a policy that challenges the dominance of the US dollar in global finance. Since then, the surge in economic activities and emergence of new financial avenues in trade through the BRI seems a viable alternative to existing SLOC. While the United States is likely to respond to countries embracing a de-dollarisation policy by imposing high import tariffs, it is inevitable that, in the coming decade, land networks will become just as critical as sea routes. As this alternative BRI trade corridors continue to expand, its strategic importance will be more imminent. For Malaysia, Malaysia shall not miss any opportunity to be part of this alternative growing network. By positioning itself in the routes, Malaysia stands to gain significant spill over in economy due to more connectivity in trading.

Noticed that the hegemony in SLOC particularly in Strait of Malacca and South China Sea for the next decade could be less significant, so pre-preparation needs to be carried out gradually by Malaysia. The aim is to be able to lay a well-prepared land-based infrastructure network that could be link to the Belt Road network seamlessly without hassle in the near future. As Malaysia's economic heart is primarily concentrated along the West Coast of Peninsular Malaysia, establishing strong connectivity to the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), currently under construction is vital. Without this crucial infrastructure, Malaysia could face significant challenges in the next decade and for the next vicennium. The reason is that construction of such infrastructure will take years, so planning and implementation need to be carried out

soonest. Given the current pace of development, Malaysia is not yet ready to take full advantage of these emerging alternative network. This gap highlights the urgency for Malaysia to accelerate its preparedness, ensuring it remains competitive and ever-ready to take advantage on the evolving global trade shipment landscape.

Given the current state of global geopolitics, the BRI initiative could face significant changes or a potential U-turn, especially with the appointment of the new President of the United States of America, Donald Trump. One of his central policies is to "Make America Great Again," and thus far less than 3 months in Oval Office, he has pursued this goal vigorously, often through a unilateral approach. Trump's administration has focused on putting America's interests first, which has led to trade wars, tariff impositions and a general pushback against multilateral agreements and initiatives such as the BRI. As such, the future trajectory of BRI as highlighted could be influenced by how the United States engages with China and other players under the new President, potentially altering the dynamics of international trade and infrastructure development in the years ahead.

China intension to create another alternative business route through BRI could be hampered too in certain extent, where only to cover countries that are not too dependent on Western aids or business. This so called delayed full-scale implementation may provide some room for Malaysia to breathe in, in order not to miss the boat. Malaysia needs to plan to enhance the current rail-networks that could cater BRI requirement in term of capacity, speed and efficiency with the aim of enhancing local in-land rail-network connectivity, which currently depend mostly on road especially for commodity and industrial goods movement. As current global developments and the continued dominance of Western powers in the world arena, the situation in the SLOC particularly in the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, is unlikely to change significantly in the next 5 to 10 years, particularly if President Donald Trump secures a second term. Therefore, while Malaysia needs to focus on seizing opportunities in alternative trade network, it is equally important to strengthen its position within the existing SLOC framework. This includes enhancing its ports, which are vital for the nation's import-export activity, and transforming them into key regional logistics hubs. Thus to stay competitive, Malaysia needs to upgrade its port capacity, facilities and efficiency to align with the goals set out in the National Industrial Master Plan 2030.

In addition to the BRI network, the continued importance of the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea as a vital SLOC could severely affected if an alternative network connecting the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea, passing through the Kra Peninsula in Thailand via land roads and bridges materialised. If became a reality, this route would allow ships in Andaman Sea to off-load cargo at coastal ports in Ranong Province Thailand, then transported the cargo by train over a 60-70 km stretch to another coastal port along Gulf of Thailand, bypassing the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. This land network could save up to nine days compared to a sea voyage. However, despite has been approved by Thai Cabinet in 2023, the project not yet kick-start. The main challenges facing the initiative are the high initial capital investment costs and concerns over its ability to handle goods within the required time efficiently. In addition, investors remain concern on the return of investment, while neighbouring countries, particularly Singapore and Malaysia, have expressed concern. These factors have hindered the development of the Land Bridge proposal, and to date, no concrete plans have been put forward even though construction is planned to begin in 2025.

Strategically based on the above development and potential scenario, the thought that who dominate the SLOC will control the maritime theatre has been irrelevant in some cases. The BRI by China and Land Bridge megaproject by Thailand in some extent has changed the landscape of SLOC in the South East Asia region. As a parts of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Malaysia does not have the unilateral authority to shape nor dictate the overall maritime spectrum in the region. The region's maritime environment is influenced by a wide array of factors, including policies and actions of other influential nations and regional players. As such, Malaysia's role in determining the future of these maritime routes is limited. However, Malaysia could focus on strategic planning and infrastructures preparation to ensure that it remains integrated-ready into the evolving global trade networks. This includes positioning itself and be well-prepared for both maritime routes and land-based network, that align with the country's economic goals and interests. By staying flexible and adaptable, Malaysia can tap into emerging opportunities, whether through participation in the BRI, enhancing its existing ports or exploring others mechanism that provide better access to global markets. Malaysia's primary objective shall focus to maximize its benefits from current status quo and ever-ready if new import-export networks emerge, ensuring that the country remains competitive and continues to thrive in a rapidly changing geopolitical or if happened, economic turmoil.

As a maritime nation, ensuring the safe passage of vessels along the SLOC is the utmost importance to Malaysia. While the current security situation remains stable with incidents of sea robberies and hijacking being relatively low, the balance of power and control could be disrupted if security conditions deteriorate. The worst-case scenario could involve the potential involvement of major international players in the region for security purposes, which would fundamentally alter the governance and management of maritime affairs. To maintain the current status and safeguard the region's maritime interest, it is essential that Malaysia and its regional partners remain vigilant. This requires enforcement agencies to be proactive, ensuring their assets ever-ready, while also ensuring effective manpower and coordinated enforcement strategies. The goal is to maintain a capable, efficient force that can respond swiftly to any threats or challenges.

Equally important is the enhancement of regional collaboration. Strengthening partnerships with neighbouring countries is critical in fostering collective security and achieving the shared goal of zero incidents along these vital maritime routes. Existing initiatives, such as the Eye in The Sky program in which involve joint patrols between Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand enforcement agencies, which has been operational since June 2005, are provenly effective. Nevertheless, these efforts should be expanded to include broader cooperation, such as intelligence sharing and real-time monitoring. By extending collaboration to cover new areas of security and information exchange, the region can bolster its ability to prevent and respond to emerging threats. The collective efforts and initiatives undertaken by all regional nations play a pivotal role in ensuring the continued safety and accessibility of the Strait of Malacca and South China Sea as critical SLOCs. By upholding regional autonomy and fostering closer collaboration, Southeast Asia can ensure that its maritime affairs remain secure, stable and free from external interference, contributing to global trade and regional prosperity.

In a nutshell, the current hegemony in Strait of Malacca and South China Sea will be remained unchanged for the next decade due to the policy and initiatives being implemented, cost effectiveness not being a burden to industry and alternatives land route is not well established yet. However, as the alternative route such as BRI become matured and more efficient, the current pattern will shift from existing maritime routes to rail-network and land-based pipeline instead. A comprehensive blueprint should be developed, aligning with national goals and ensuring the country is well-positioned to capitalize on emerging opportunities. Such foresight is crucial for Malaysia to navigate the evolving global trade landscape, ensuring continued prosperity and competitiveness for the next vicennium and beyond.

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