

THE ROLE OF THE MALACCA STRAIT IN THE PAST AND CURRENT REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL POWER RELATIONS AND SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

Throughout history, one of the hottest regions in the world, South East Asia, has represented one of the highest targets for the main actors who searched for dominance on a regional or even international level. Found in the very heart of the region and of the security equations of the great powers, the South China Sea and the string of islands and straits that ensured its connections with the Indian Ocean have represented security and economic nodal points that helped spread the influence and protect the strategic interests of almost every major international player who desired to dominate the region.

Amongst these, the Malacca Strait stood and still stands today as one of the core strategic points in the region and the entire world, bringing enormous satisfaction and profits for those in control of it, while at the same time representing an increasing vulnerability for the coastal states, for the major international players and especially for the regional actors.

On a thorough analysis, controlling the Malacca Strait represented one of the main strengths for most dominant international players, either by directly controlling it or by imposing their influence on the strait through third parties or using military, political and commercial links.

Moreover, today, Malacca is one of the most important and vulnerable spots in the entire world. The high commercial and, particularly energy dependence on the strait of both regional players and international actors put Malacca in the top of the strategic points that the international security architecture depends on.

Keywords: *Malacca maritime straits, hegemony, security equations, commercial strategy, energy security.*

Introduction

History has revealed many times that a maritime power, or an actor holding a clear advantage by sea, had an upper hand when talking about

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security and power relations. Ever since the beginning of the large scale commerce by sea and the development of military sea powers, whoever controlled the seas got the chance to control or dominate commerce, particularly when talking about goods or resources mostly transported by sea.

One of the particularities of the seas regards not as much the open seas, but rather the inflexion points, the places where two or more water parts get connected, as well as those where the land and the sea make a geographical link that leaves no other option of passage.

Perhaps the most relevant examples of such inflexion points are the straits and the maritime channels, representing from the oldest times an important part of the power calculations of a state, from the primary role of blocking passage to the advantages it offered to the one in control of it due to taxes or the primary rights to resources through commerce. Of course, controlling a strait also depended on the military power, forcing the state in control to constantly increase their military power.

Found in one of the most turbulent areas in the world, the strait of Malacca represents today the most transited commercial node, with huge implications on the security and power relations and, particularly, on the energy equations. However, the importance and particularities of the Malacca strait raised it as one of the most important and relevant spots in the world from the Ancient times, with many great powers depending on it in order to impose their domination, be it regional or in the entire world.

Actors in the region in the past

The most relevant actor in the region, China's power has always been connected to its geographic position and the advantages, as well as disadvantages it offered and has always been aware of their existence and drew their strategic games around them. From this perspective, China has attempted from the Ancient times to control and dominate on a regional perspective using key strategic points that they have identified in connection with their strategic objectives. By land, we can speak of the Silk Road and the way small Chinese communities have been established throughout Asia while by sea, China has attempted and succeeded to dominate the main maritime communication links, be it the South China Sea, the straits of Malacca and Makassar or certain islands or cities in the Indian Ocean. (Kaplan, 2014, p. 70)

Long time before the European maritime expeditions in the Indian Ocean, China has manifested, in the entire South East Asia and beyond, certain tendencies to expand its influence and create a safety area surrounding its vast empire built and maintained since Ancient times. A relevant example is that of the expeditions led by Chinese Admiral Zhang He, during the Ming

dynasty, who has organized seven expeditions in the Indian Ocean, leading fleets of over 300 ships, with carefully chosen destination points such as India, East Africa, the Red Sea, the Persian and Oman Gulfs with the strait of Hormuz between them and, obviously, the Malacca Strait and the islands surrounding it. (Harari, 2017, p. 245)

A somehow revolutionary feature of Zhang He's expeditions for its time was the purpose and conduct of the Chinese during their visits in the places they visited between 1405 and 1433. Zhang He never attempted to conquer the ports or the regions it visited. Instead, the Chinese offered gifts, exported values and traditions, established small communities and in return, asked for the recognition of their supremacy. In other words, Zhang He's mission was to expand the influence of the Chinese Empire on a medium to long term, creating premises for Chinese supremacy in the key points chosen and creating links that would assure a safety zone for China. (Ferguson, 2011, pp. 46-47) Everything China did through history in its surroundings and in the entire Asia is connected to such way of thinking that has been practiced since Ancient times. In case of Malacca, the communities established and the exchanges with the local populations have created an affinity that we can easily recognize today. By the time the Europeans have arrived in the region, Chinese influence was already in place and there was no way it could be reverted in such manner that would allow an opposition to China. When the Portuguese, Dutch or British colonies were established in places such as Malaysia or Indonesia, they extended the influence of the European powers in the region but could not eliminate or change the behaviour of the populations against the Chinese. Perhaps it is one of the reasons why such attempts were never relevant or even truly considered throughout history.

Due to the Chinese behaviour in the age of Zhang He and not only, by the time the Europeans arrived in the region, they came into contact with an already existing commercial, cultural and political network, facilitated by nodal points that were already in place. The Portuguese arrived first, in the 15th century, after the expeditions of Vasco da Gama and Pedro Alvarez Cabral that opened the maritime route towards the Indian Ocean and South East Asia. Their arrival in an advanced and complex market and system determined or even forced them to adapt to the models and features already in place. Taking advantage of their technological and military superiority, the Portuguese could rapidly extend their domination in the region, perhaps also taking advantage of the strategic retreat of China after the Ming dynasty was overthrown from power. In order to do so, they have conquered important cities or established new cities in key points, but mostly have imposed their domination by controlling, through intermediaries who respected their

interests, all of these being found in inflexion points or at the confluence of commercial and political networks already in place. (Paine, 2015, p. 342)

One of spots that brought about a major advantage for the competition in the area was the Malacca Strait, which ensured a connection point not just with the coastal states, but especially to the South China Sea and, perhaps most important, a bridge between the Indian and Chinese micro-universes.

Understanding the potential of the Malacca Strait, Portugal imposed and strengthened its domination over a series of commercial ports spreading from the island of Macau, through the Malacca Strait and the city of Melaka, connecting South East Asia with India, Arabia, Africa and, eventually, Lisbon. (Ferguson, 2018, p. 48) Though initially driven in the region only by the desire to impose monopoly over the spice trade, as a means to equalize the expansion of Spain in the Americas, the dynamics of the Asian trade determined Portugal to transcend from a simple player to regional hegemony. From such approach, Malacca quickly became an essential part of Portugal's strategy, particularly due to the city of Melaka, the most prosperous seaport in the region and capital city to the Sultanate of Melaka. Apart from its strategic position that allowed domination over the passage through the strait, Melaka was also in close relationships with the Mogul Empire, which also transformed it in a passageway to the Gulf of Bengal. (Paine, 2015, pp. 348-349)

Another specificity of Melaka comes from its geographic positioning at the confluence of two large monsoon systems, the south-western one, bringing ships from the Middle East and India towards the Far East, and the north-eastern monsoon, who brought ships from the Far East towards India and the Indian subcontinent. (Kaplan, 2016, p. 104) Particularly during a time when navigation was almost exclusively performed using air and sea streams, such an advantage meant that ships were forced to go through Melaka. Such perspective not only made Melaka a strong commercial actor in the area, but also determined the creation of a cultural, ethnic and confessional mosaic that can still be observed today. Such features made Melaka an attraction point for every expanding power in the region. Chinese were there during the Ming dynasty and the Portuguese followed during their Asian expansion, both taking advantage over the fact that the Sultanate didn't need to pursue territorial expansion policies in order to get access to resources as all were brought about by commerce. Focusing on trade, the Sultanate of Melaka's military power was meagre, while their relationship with the Mogul Empire was not that high to ensure its security, making it an easy prey for strong expansionist actors such as Portugal in the 15th century.

Portugal quickly concretized their interest in Melaka, conquering the city in 1511 and imposing their dominion for over one and a half centuries. Melaka brought the Malacca strait in Portuguese hands as well, making

Portugal not only a major participant to the regional trade affairs, but allowed them to control some of the most important long distance routes to the detriment of their European rivals, particularly Venice. Furthermore, by getting Melaka out of the Muslim Mughal Empire's domination, Portugal also got to control a large part of the trade between Venice and the Arabs in Alexandria, Cairo or Mecca. (Paine, 2015, p. 344)

The Portuguese conquest of the Malacca strait and the significant advantages it has offered them put Malacca definitively on top of the most desirable and important areas in the world, the strait being a part of the security equations and power relations between the major actors ever since. Over the next years, Portugal started to benefit even more from their rule over Malacca. As all the spices came through Malacca, reaching the Arabs in Mecca and, afterwards, heading towards Cairo through the Gulf of Aden and the Hormuz Strait, Portugal got to impose their domination over the entire route, controlling, in part, the entire trade in spices.

It was specifically due to this set of advantages that the Strait of Malacca drew the attention of the Dutch Empire, who became the world hegemony after the decline of Portugal following the Spanish conquest in 1580. The Dutch reach Malacca around 1595, focusing on the conquest and establishment of what later became Indonesia, turning it into an alternative to the Indies, controlled by Great Britain. Indonesia quickly becomes the Dutch trade centre in the region, with Batavia (today's Jakarta) hosting the headquarters of the Dutch East Indies Company. (Neguť, 2009, p. 53)

Through Indonesia, the Dutch controlled the Malacca Strait and gained priority access to the Strait of Makassar, South China Sea, Java Sea, the Moluccas Sea as well as the multiple archipelagos in the area.

The first joint stock company in history, the Dutch East Indies Company got to rapidly extend and consolidate their monopoly in the region, by practicing trade on a global scale. Due to the capitalist system promoted by the Dutch East Indies Company, the huge profits encouraged and attracted large investments, which were mainly directed in extending and modernizing the Dutch commercial and military fleet, which got to stabilize the Dutch dominion. (Ferguson, 2018, p. 38)

In the meantime, the British Empire got in control over India and the British East Indies Company got to rival the Dutch one in the Indian Ocean trade map. Eventually, following a series of agreements between the two companies and between the Dutch and British Empires, the two sides split the market into the trade with spices, through Malacca, under Dutch monopoly, and the trade with Indian textiles, under British rule. (Ferguson, 2018, p. 42)

It is one of the particular reasons for why the British are not interested in Malacca at first, prioritizing their control over India and allowing the Dutch

to dominate the strait and the region. However, due to this agreement and the monopoly over the trade in textiles, the British forced the Dutch to forward them a significant share of the trade with China, becoming a *de facto* beneficiary of the trade between China and India. Their dominion has been extended after the Opium Wars, determined by the Chinese dependence on the drug coming exclusively from India that opened the large scale trade between China and the Great Britain and significantly extended the British influence in the region. (Gombrich, 2006, pp. 264-265)

In time, the British Empire became more interested in Malacca, as their influence grew worldwide while Dutch Empire was in decline. But the most important moment happened in 1819, with the creation of the city-state of Singapore, after an agreement between Great Britain, the East Indies Company and the Sultanate of Johor. Using Chinese colonists, the British forged the new state on western values and models in the best positioned spot in the Malacca Strait and in the very heart of Malaysia. Later, in the 20th century, following the collapse of their Colonial Empire, the British tried to maintain their power in Singapore with the aid of a local governance of western orientation. The British plan concretized with the rise to power of Chinese lawyer Lee Kuan Yew. Benefitting from British education, Lee succeeded in quickly transforming Singapore into one of the most prosperous states in the region, but also into a stability and balancing factor in the region, in one of the most relevant examples of *soft power*. Maintaining the connections with Great Britain at the highest possible level, Lee managed to assure a trade connection between China and Europe, while at the same time forging an alliance with Malaysia and avoiding both the Chinese direct domination and the regional power ambitions of Indonesia under the rule of Dictator Sukarno. (Kaplan, 2016, pp. 134-137)

A new and remarkable turning point for the situation of the Malacca Strait happens in 1972, when Indonesia proposes a pact to the two other coastal states in the strait that implied the three states taking over control over the strait. The pact was nothing else than another attempt of Indonesia to impose as regional power and front state in the Non-Aligned Movement. Lee Kuan Yew categorically refuses, militating for maintaining the strait as an open international maritime way and understanding the exceptional role it played in the international trade and strategic system. It is the moment when Lee's conduct proves the effects and benefits of the American hegemony installed in the international system after World War II – the so-called *Pax Americana*. Understanding the importance of keeping the United States as close as possible, Lee argued that the Non-Aligned Movement existed in the respective region due to the Americans' fight against communist regimes that allowed non-communist states to develop under the

protective umbrella of the United States in the world. Using such an argument, Lee admits not just the existence of US interests in the Malacca strait and surroundings, but also expresses the desire of Singapore to get closer ties with the giant in the West. (Kaplan, 2016, pp. 142-143)

Lee's approach towards the United States did not refer only to the attitude of Sukarno, but was particularly determined by the need to get some assurances in case of a more assertive position of China, the biggest power in the region and the second most powerful communist regime at the time. The fear of China was not at all random and not just because of the geographical closeness or of the commercial and geopolitical equations of China. Rather, it was due to the Chinese populations in the area that Lee tried to force an approach that would keep them away from China's sphere of influence.

Given the strategic retreat after the Ming dynasty, China's presence in the entire South East Asia was almost eminently carried on by the Chinese communities established in certain areas who continue to influence even today through their traditional connections with other Chinese communities. In South East Asia and particularly in the Malacca Strait region, Chinese have not just represented a link between almost every state or city in the region, but also one of the intermediaries that have facilitated trade inside and outside the regional frame. The great commercial links and international partnerships were established using the Chinese minority as bonding, an ethnic line that basically assured the connection between Singapore and Honk Kong or between Thailand and Malaysia, despite the latter having the characteristic of a real ethnic mosaic. (Landes, 2013, p. 399)

At the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, the Strait of Malacca was not just a crossroads for trade and geopolitical networks, nor was it only a small mosaic of local populations. In time, Portuguese, Dutch, British, as well as Chinese or Indians – all had passed through, temporarily imposed their domination and, eventually, had installed their long term presence either through colonies established and developed, such as Singapore for Great Britain or Indonesia for the Dutch, or through merchants' and colonists' districts in major cities such as Manila, Batavia or Melaka. Of all, except on the case of Singapore who was maintained as a city-state under British protectorate, the Chinese had the most resilient way to impose their domination or control over the region, one that did not necessarily involve a direct conquest. Either by entering the administrative or economic structures of several countries in the region, at a local or general level, or by imposing itself as an internal arbitrator to their local issues, Chinese have created or determined the creation of structures and networks similar to the ones in China or even directly dependent to them. (Paine, 2015, p. 406)

In the 18th century, throughout the entire South East Asia there are Chinese communities, often self-administrated, coexisting with Europeans' presence in certain areas such as Melaka, the sultanate of Johor or in the Dutch East Indies, as Indonesia used to be named at the time. This hasn't allowed only the perpetuation of a direct contact and a means for the Chinese Empire to influence the states in the region, but also an increase of contacts and commercial cooperation, laying the foundations for today's commercial mosaic that we can see in the region. (Kerr, 2015, p. 55)

The network China created in the region not only resisted and still exists today, but also represented a basis from which China has launched itself in its influence extending strategy on a regional and global level that we can also see today.

Actors in the region in the present

Nowadays, the Strait of Malacca is an integrated part of what is likely to be the main commercial and strategic node in the world. Together with the neighbouring straits of Sunda, Lombok and Makassar, as well as the South China Sea and the other small insular seas, Malacca forms the connection between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, bringing different worlds together. The region is transited by over half of the world trade every year, one third of the total maritime traffic and, in energy concerns, two thirds of the supplies for South Korea, around 60% of the supplies for Japan and Taiwan and approximately 80% of the necessary raw oil for China. (Kaplan, 2014, p. 26)

The worldwide high dependence on Malacca that we see today makes it vulnerable not just in regard to economic and commercial exchanges, but also in what concerns piracy, terrorism and organized crime, particularly in the ports. Today, the most crowded commercial node in the world does not benefit from an international cooperation frame that would include not just littoral states, but also regional powers and international actors. Today, littoral states are forced to rely mostly on their own resources and capabilities, with very little aid from other states in what concerns the development of such capabilities. (Arsyad, 2008, p. 176)

Of course, Chinese dependence on the energy imports coming through Malacca is not a matter of novelty. However, the constant raise of this dependence and the increase in the energy commercial volume transiting Malacca has the tendency of becoming problematic, furthermore in the context of China not having realistic serious alternatives to it, while the littoral states, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, manifest constant development and economic growth that might put them in an increasingly stronger position in relation to China.

As an answer to this, China has been continuously extending its influence not just in the South China Sea, but through the entire South East Asia, basically using two relevant methods: strategic expansion, through the control upon certain strategic points from where it could exert its influence – the so called “String of Pearls” with which China has been attempting for years to control certain nodes or spots that would extend their position at a regional and world level; and the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea through which it could expand the territorial waters under its jurisdiction and where it could easily unfold operations of exploration and exploitation of oil and gases in the continental shelf.

The latter represents a tactic used by China in its attempt to somehow dodge the international law and conventions in the field, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the sea, according to which China shares exclusive maritime economic areas with Indonesia, Taiwan or South Korea. (Christensen, 2015, p. 98)

The construction of artificial islands does not represent the only tactic adopted by the Chinese in the South China Sea. There currently are a large number of inhabited islands of very small dimensions that China seeks to control including by artificially extending their surface. The most well-known and relevant examples are those of Spratly and Parcel Archipelagos, disputed over with the Philippines and Vietnam and where China currently leads a dynamic expansion policy by extending its control over the territorial waters of these islands and by strategically placing oil platforms in the area. At least in these two cases, China takes advantage over the silent standing aside by the international community, and particularly by the United States of America, who, in general, do not intervene in litigious situations regarding disputed islands, insisting instead on a peaceful resolution of such litigations, in conformity with international law and in a way that would not trouble the freedom of navigation. (Christensen, 2015, p. 102)

In the context of the Malacca Strait, one simple look at the map reveals that, with the extension of its control over the territorial waters through the Spratly Archipelago, China gets closer enough to the mouth of Malacca. Logically, one may ask what will be the next step of China should its intentions in Spratly and Parcel be successful. Will China attempt a dispute with Singapore, Malaysia or Indonesia over some of the main small islands at the Eastern border of Malacca that Beijing would afterwards use to control, together with Singapore, the Eastern mouth of the strait and thus reverse China's dependence on Malacca?

China's expansion in the South China Sea isn't, however, the only relevant example of strategic orientation and increasing tendency in its search

for solutions that would reduce their Malacca dilemma. Today, the access to the Malacca Strait increasingly becomes one of the strategic sources for China, particularly in regard to its access to energy resources. In fact, China has been trying for years to multiply diversify their sources for energy. For example, by taking control of the Gwadar port in Pakistan, while in the meantime massively investing in rebuilding the ancient Silk Road and other such land routes, China increasingly reduces its huge dependency of the straits of Malacca of Hormuz, overcrowded and largely controlled today by USA and its allies. (Chomsky, 2015, p. 85)

But how can China extend its influence in or around the Malacca Strait following the example of the Gwadar port? How and when would China be able to activate their historic "marks" applied throughout the region by developing commercial networks and, particularly, by establishing and supporting local Chinese communities in other countries or by maintaining the strategic dependence connections with smaller countries they had created over centuries?

Further, one the main issue regards the world rivalry between China and the United States of America. For years, the US have been considering China as an expanding hegemonic power that requires a balancing that the American Administration needs to perform basically through regional allies. On the other side, China regards the actions of the United States as part of a large scale containment plan with the purpose of stopping the legitimate rise of China. Both visions fit into the dynamics of power balance in the most realist terms, fact officially demonstrated by the US-ASIA Rebalancing Strategy that President Barrack Obama has launched in 2011 and by the Counter-Intervention Strategy of China. If we add to the two strategies the East Asia Pivot of the Russian Federation and India's Look East Policy, the regional scenery gets more and more complicated, like a multiple chessboard where the US moves with its 7th Fleet and China counters with the fast militarization of South China Sea, while every actor in the region tries to draw advantages through strategic control over parts of the commercial nod that includes the Strait of Malacca. (Sharma, 2014, p. 255)

In what concerns the United States of America, the main purpose of President Obama's strategy was to create a constant naval military pressure upon the chain of straits Malacca-Sunda-Lombok-Makassar, as a coercive strategy that would moderate China's behaviour and eventually force it to remain within the first island chain, formed by the main archipelagos along the East Asian coast. (Sharma, 2014, p. 256)

Without leaving their *Asian Pivot*, the most recent US National Security Strategy adopted by President Donald Trump in December 2017 includes

fewer specific references to South East Asia. Their support for regional allies remains high, as does the objective of a more articulated presence in the region. Besides, however, except on an intensified economic rivalry, the strategy and policy of Donald Trump manifests a high ambiguity, for now, in what concerns this region. Of course, Trump's rhetoric remains aggressive enough, but we currently don't have enough reliable data that would help us strategically comparing today's US intentions with those of the USA under the Obama administrations. (*National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017) Can we speak of a shift in US policies? As has already been proved in the mandate of the current US President, not shifts seem to be the issue, but rather a high degree of unpredictability that US presence on the international level less clear and sometimes even surprising. Given the well-known obsessions of Donald Trump in regard to China, it is highly unlikely that the US today won't grant enough attention to Beijing or to its regional and international ambitions. Furthermore, Trump's policies and rhetoric regarding a possible resolution of the North Korean file brings US on a new chapter in South East Asia, one that hasn't involved Washington DC for quite a while.

As a response, China not only continues its strategic rhetoric concerning South East Asia, but also considers West Pacific as a vital zone for its own sovereignty, integrity, security and development, seeking to identify strategic locations, strategic resources and strategic domination, completing their *String of Pearls*. Complementary, China tries to impose a long-distance domination in the Indian Ocean-West Pacific region through their "Far Seas Ocean Strategy". (Sharma, 2014, p. 258)

Clear enough, both powers will continue to hold and strengthen their influence in South East Asia and particularly in the area of the Malacca Strait. In the meantime, India's sphere of influence is expected to be maintained and even extended as well, considering their regional ambitions that many times stand against the Chinese ones.

Conclusion

Of course, the most important actors will remain the three coastal states, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, all three considered for the past decades as part of the emerging countries, due to their economic boom, the high rate of investments, their social developments and their increasingly important and relevant geopolitical power. On every possible scale, their opening to the Malacca Strait will continue to be their main advantage as well as vulnerability, furthermore as China's dynamic and almost aggressive

expansion in the South China Sea undoubtedly regards Malacca as a possible target if not an objective.

In the meantime, Malacca will remain and even consolidate its position as the most overcrowded commercial node in the world, continuing to represent an advantage as well as vulnerability for most actors involved. Its uniqueness and the traditional geographical position it has will continue to make Malacca, as well as the other straits and small seas in the region, an active player in the security and power equations in the region and, without a doubt, in the entire world.

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