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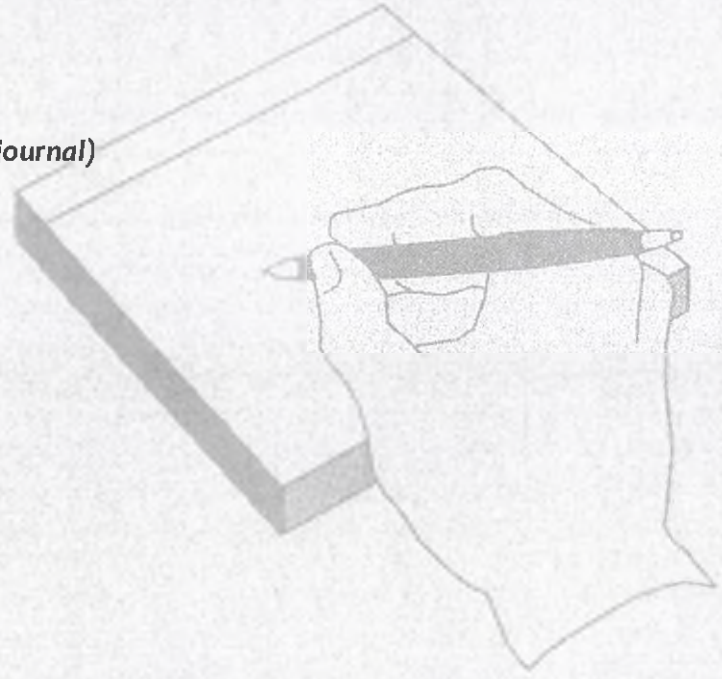
India and China Strategic Interests in the Straits of Malacca

Sumathy Permal



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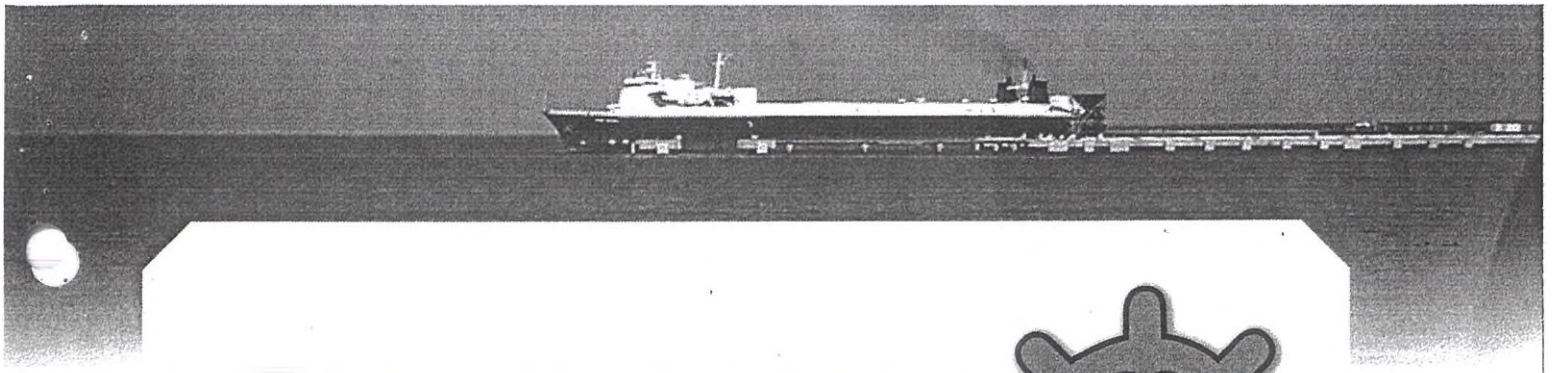
ILO MARITIME LABOUR CONVENTION 2006



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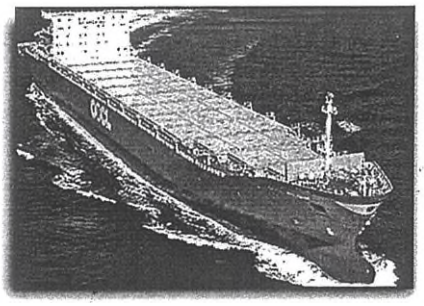
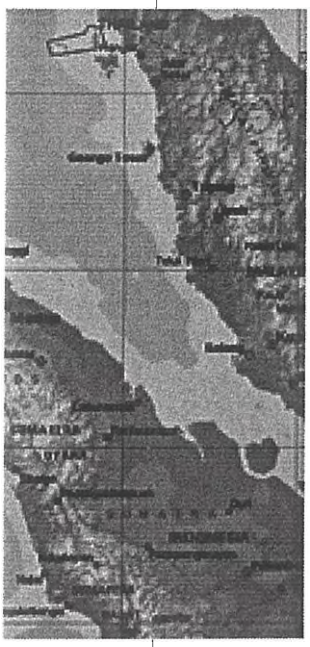


India and China Strategic Interests in the Straits of Malacca

By: **Sumathy Permal**

The Straits of Malacca is located between the east coast of Sumatra and the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia, stretches for about 520 miles. The Strait of Singapore, about 100 miles long, is located between south of the island of Singapore and south eastern tip of Peninsular Malaysia, and north of Indonesian Riau islands. At its western entrance, the Malacca Straits is spacious and the littoral coasts of Indonesia, Malaysia are separated by about 200 miles of water. The straits, however, begin to take on the shape of a funnel as vessels proceed through it in a southeasterly direction. By the time a line of latitude is reached just South of 3°N and just below One Fathom Bank the territorial waters of Indonesia and Malaysia begin to overlap. The narrowest breadth between opposite shores of the Strait of Malacca – at the south-western tip of the Malay Peninsula – is 8.4 nautical miles though the navigable channel for deep draught vessels is much less. The narrowest breadth of the Singapore Strait is only 3.2 nautical miles and throughout its length it is constantly less than 15 miles. At its eastern outlet into the South China Sea, where it is bounded solely by Malaysian and Indonesian shores, the breadth of the sea passage is 11.1 nautical miles.



The linked Straits are the shortest sea route forming the main seaway between the Indian Ocean (via the Andaman Sea) and the Pacific Ocean (via the South China Sea). It is also the shortest route for tankers trading between the Persian Gulf and East Asian countries. The Straits of Malacca is a critical and strategic waterway in the global trading system; with more than 60,000 vessels transiting its waters every year carrying more than a quarter of world trade and almost all oil imports to Japan and China.

The volume of traffic averages about 250 ships on a daily basis of which 36% are oil tankers. About 3.23 million barrels of crude oil and refined products were transported from the region en route to Japan through the South China Sea. Approximately, 80% of Japan's oil imports pass through the Strait for more than a thousand years, trade, religion and the civilization of India, China, the Muslim world and the Europeans have flowed through Straits of Malacca.

Threats to shipping in the Malacca Straits primarily emanate from piracy and transnational crime. There is also possibility for threat of maritime terrorism in the straits. This raises considerable global concern since any disruption to the flow of maritime traffic through the Straits of Malacca would seriously affect world economy. Thus the security of the Malacca Straits is not only an important commitment to the littorals but also to the international community.

The strategic nature of the Straits of Malacca as the main sea lane of communication to East Asia has led many countries to want to control the Straits, or to at least project power there, including the United

States, China and India. Indeed, the pursuance of strategies to gain control has made the Straits of Malacca a venue of a silent struggle between rising powers.

Over 40% of India's rapidly growing trade passes through the Straits of Malacca, giving it a major interest in securing the safety of shipping through this vital international waterway. Inclusion in its security would therefore be in India's national interest. The mercantile traffic transiting the Malacca Straits passes close to the Indian area of maritime interest and therefore any unforeseen contingency or development in the Malacca Strait has security implications for India, said Vijay Sakhuja, Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi. India's security analysts argue that India has a stake in maintaining the safety and security of the Straits of Malacca and that the government should pursue an aggressive strategy of contributing to the region's efforts to keep the Straits of Malacca safe and free from threat. While the littorals of the Straits are continuing their own initiatives to take care of this strategic waterway, India, which has a stake in the strait, believes that it has a role to play in the strait's security system.

The Eye in the Sky initiative is part of the larger Malacca Strait's Security Initiative (MSSI). India is among the countries that are keen to participa the MSSI. Dr Vijay Shakuja said that although I might not be a littoral, it is contiguous to the stra Indira Point -- the southern tip of India's Andan and Nicobar Islands. Thus India aspires to h influence in this region and indeed in flexing its m tary muscle by sending its naval fleet for visits Southeast Asian ports.

Besides these visits to Southeast Asian ports, th Indian Navy has also been exercising with it Singaporean counterparts as well as the Indonesiar Navy and the Thai Navy. The Indian Navy has established a bilateral agreement with Indonesia called 'IndoIndon' that involves patrolling the Strait's western approaches. These navies have conducted a cooperative exercise called IndIndonCorpat (Indo-Indonesia Coordinated Patrol). Similarly, India has also been engaged in maritime cooperation with Singapore that includes joint naval exercises, submarine training and bilateral exchanges.

India's coastal defense strategy in the 1950's and 1960s was extended to a strategic sea control and sea denial in 1970s and 1980s. Indian naval strategy in the new century demands more submarines, a strong mine laying and mine clearing capability and naval air reconnaissance capabilities to the Malacca Straits.