

# **The Straits of Malacca and Straits of Hormuz: A Brief Historical Review**

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## **Abstract**

This study attempts to revisit two prominent trading networks between the Arab World and the Malay Archipelago, namely the Straits of Malacca and the Straits of Hormuz, which historically linked the two worlds. This historical linkage is made possible via visitations by the Arab-Persian traders to the Malay World and the Malay traders' visits to their destinations. Given the geopolitical environments they have experienced in the past and present, there is no denying the immense significance of these Straits to Malaysia and the Kingdom of Oman, respectively. They had contributed abundantly in the past to Malaysia and the Kingdom of Oman, as well as to the countries bordering the two Straits. Nonetheless, the study argues that given the current unstable world conditions, the safe navigation of both Straits is increasingly vulnerable. It also highlights some socio-economic and political dynamism, which reveal historical changes and continuities that have occurred in the past and present. The situation here seems critical since both Straits have established themselves as major world shipping lanes from the West to the East and vice versa. In short, the study investigates the current issues and how small countries like Malaysia and the Kingdom of Oman handle conflict in the most strategic and effective way.

Keywords: Straits of Malacca, Straits of Hormuz, Malaysia, Oman

## **INTRODUCTION**

These important trading straits were formerly well-known as international trading port cities, and they continue to be strategically and economically important to both Malaysia and the Kingdom of Oman in today's world. It is mentioned that "the Straits of Malacca is 600 miles long and it is the main passageway between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea". Furthermore, it serves

as a major sea route for the Middle Eastern business community and individuals, as well as European businesses for the Asian markets (Ho 2009, 233-247; Bramasto 2012, 1-23; Khalid 2006, 1-8; Noraini, Sharifah Munirah, and Zarina 2014, 80-98; and Evers and Hornidge 2007, 417-33). Therefore, this implies that a regular flow of exports and imports, as well as knowledge, had occurred simultaneously via the passage from West to East and East to West.

In addition, the Straits of Malacca once linked Sumatra, Riau-Lingga, and Thai-Malay vassal states into a single political-cultural zone. As a result of the geostrategic and economic importance of the Straits of Malacca, many old Malay Kingdoms or port-city kingdoms, such as Pasai, Aceh, Indragiri, Singapore, Kedah, and Johor, were developed due to this favorable environment (Mohd Hazmi 2012, 109-127; Rahmah Osman et. all. 2018, 4-46, Andaya and Andaya 2017, 1-300).

Similar to her counterpart in the Malay World, the Strait of Hormuz, a particular strait located in a remote area of the globe, has benefited the Arab countries and the Persian Gulf. Geographically, “the Strait of Hormuz is 35 to 60 miles (55 to 95 km) wide and separates Iran in the north and from the Arabian Peninsula in the south” (Gaur et al., 2021; Shepard and Pratson 2020, 1-20; Al-Jabri 2012, 38-200). The demands and needs for trading in the East and West had historically and culturally linked both Straits in the past, as exemplified by a steady inflow of Arab-Persian, European, and Malay traders between the concerned countries. Both Straits have long been regarded as having great strategic and economic importance for trade with Asia via the Straits of Malacca, as well as with the Middle East. In this sense, certain experts in the field have correctly observed that there were robust economic activities in areas surrounding these major Straits of the world, and they remain active today (Mohd Hazmi 2012, 109-127; Shepard and Pratson 2020, 1-20; Al-Jabri 2012, 38-200).

Concerningly, due to the Straits' significant politico-economic importance, they faced challenges or problems that were essentially identical, which include piracy attacks, possible closures or blockades by another power, as well as ship collisions. These circumstances would undoubtedly disrupt the existing trade and commercial activities in the area (Frecon 2008, 15-31; Shepard and Pratson 2020, 1-20; Khalid 2006, 1-8; Bramasto 2012, 1-23; Osman 1987, 7-77; Amirell 2019, 96-160; Siti Zubaidah and Mohd Azizuddin 2010, 83-105; and Qu and Meng 2012, 1-14). Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that such a contest for economic and political hegemony in the aforementioned regions in the past was significantly different from that which exists today, partly because the latter is now governed and restrained by a set of modern standards and logics.

In short, it is without exaggeration to note that today's realities are more complex and vibrant than in the past. This is primarily due to the endless rivalries between the United States and China on the one hand and the Middle Eastern conflict, which is centered around fears that Iran's nuclear power would shatter the United States' status quo in the region. This is covered in the subsequent discussions.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study employs a historical method, which is an approach frequently used to reconstruct past events. The events that have been reconstructed are those that involve human thought, speech, action, and experience. According to scholars like Garraghan (1957), it takes systematic principles and a set of rules to effectively collect historical sources, critically evaluate them, and present a written synthesis or results in order to reconstruct a historical event. Therefore, studies on a variety

of primary and scholarly works written in both local and foreign languages were utilized as sources for this analysis. The library research method and primary documents were mainly used as this paper attempts to uncover obstacles and challenges that the two countries have faced in the past and present, including how they work to maintain security in the Straits despite constant political and economic uncertainties, the possibility of collisions, and piracy attacks in the region. Along the way, it is equally important to uncover persistent historical continuities that manifest, either directly or indirectly, through socio-economic and political changes that have occurred in the regions.

Additionally, a wide range of political and socio-economic commentaries (both in local and foreign languages), many of which are translations of historical texts written in Malay as well as some notable traveler's accounts, were included in the usage of primary documents, such as *Suma Oriental* by Tome Pires, *The Voyages and Adventures of Ferdinand Mendez Pinto* by Ferdinand Mendez Pinto, *Rihlatus Sirafi: Catatan Pengembaraan di Alam Melayu, China, India dan Afrika* [Sirafi's voyages: Notes on adventures in the Malay World, China, India and Africa] by Sulayman at-Tajir and Abu Zaid As-Sirafi, *Al-Masalik wal Mamalik* [The roads and kingdoms] by Ibn Khondazbah, *Meadows of gold and mines of gems* by Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Ali al-Mas'udi, Vol.1; *Aja'ibul Hind: Kisah-kisah Ajaib di daratan dan lautan* [Miracle of India: Miracle stories on the mainland and the Indian Ocean] by Buzurg al-Rahmhurmuzi. This paper also referred to other relevant works in the field like *Ar-risalah al-Ula* [The first message] by Abu Dulaf al-Muhalhil, *Ansab al-ashraf* [Genealogies of the nobles] by Ahmad bin Yahya Baladhuri, and *Portuguese Documents on Malacca from 1509-1511* by M. J. Pintado. Besides that, some historical texts written in Malay had shed light on the Malay-Arabo-Persian world, such as *At-Tarikh Salasilah Negeri Kedah* by Muhammad Hassan, *Sulalatus Salatin*

by A. Samad Ahmad, *Hikayat Raja-raja Pasai*, and *Hikayat Maha Merowangsa*, to name a few. Moreover, some important secondary literatures were used since they primarily based their writings on a variety of archival documents.

## **DISCUSSION**

In light of this analysis, the paper divides the ongoing discussion into two sections; the first of which tells a narrative about the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Hormuz. This section specifically informs readers about the importance of these two Straits to Malaysia, the Kingdom of Oman, and the neighboring states. More importantly, it helps readers to identify certain important historical patterns (observed through changes and continuities) discovered from this brief survey, including ongoing political struggles among the competitors for political-economic hegemony in the aforementioned regions. In addition, there were occasional attacks by pirates and shipwrecking incidents or collisions in the concerned regions. The second section seeks to locate and examine such historical changes and continuities in the present day in relation to the obstacles and challenges faced by local and international actors in the regions.

Historically, the Malay World and Oman developed a relationship following the steady maritime trade engagements between their traders. For instance, Middle-Eastern traders discovered a variety of high-quality spices from the Malay World. It was reported that a sizable number of Malay trading ships entered and exited some of the old port cities around the Persian Gulf, at least since the first century C.E. On another note, the Arab-Persian traders of that era referred to the Malay World as *Zabaj*. The Omani traders specifically had been instrumental not only in exporting Middle Eastern products and importing Eastern products, but also in spreading the light of Islam

throughout Africa and the Eastern world (At-Tajir and As-Sirafi ca. 900CE, 69-215, cited from Arsyad Mokhtar, trans.; Al-Mas'udi ca. 956CE, 1-464, cited from Aloys Sprenger, trans; and Ibn Khordazbeh ca. 870CE, 1-40, cited from Arsyad Mokhtar, trans; Al-Rahmhurmuzi 10<sup>th</sup> CE, 11-212, cited from Arsyad Mokhtar, trans.). This undoubtedly demonstrates the Omanis' vast resources in handling sea-going vessels and distant trades. Naturally, Oman has been able to connect the Middle East culturally and historically to the Malay World (Osman et. all. 2018, 4-46; Evers and Hornidge 2007, 417-33).

A considerable number of Malay ships had been cruising the Persian Gulf and neighboring port cities as early as the first century CE as they started to actively supply two important Malay goods needed by the Middle Eastern market, namely cinnamon and coco-yams. In this way, these sailors, traders, and travelers wandered around the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, which became major shipping routes (Pires 1512-1515CE, 7-278, cited from Armando Cortesao, trans.; Yaapar, 2021; Islam 2010, 7-23). Similarly, Persian-Arab traders had also travelled as far as Indus Valley and the Malay World in search of highly-sought items like silver, bronze, and ivory, to name a few (Yaapar, 2021; Islam 2010, 7-23).

In those days, ships travelling from notable Malay port cities like Kedah and Malacca used the old Persian port cities of Suhar, Sur, Ormuz, Muscat, and Qalhat as transit points. In this way, the Far Eastern port cities like Qinzhou and Guangzhou were strategically linked by the Malay and Persian-Arab traders on one end, and the old Persian-Arab port cities like Aden and Basra on the other. Naturally, the Omanis and Malays became the key players in the Straits of Malacca and Straits of Hormuz region (Pires 1512-1515CE, 7-278, cited from Armando Cortesao, trans; Ma Huan 1433CE, 137-177, cited from V.H.G. Mills, trans.; Yaapar, 2021; Al-Hashimy 2015, 781-791; Islam 2010, 7-23). This trading relationship was surely manifested in the form of cultural

influence from the Omanis on the Malays, particularly the close resemblance of the Oman's *muscati* dress with that of Kedah's royal attire (Osman et. all. 2018, 4-46; Yaapar, 2021).

Abu Zaid, a prominent Arab traveler, mentioned in his travel accounts that a certain Malay polity, known as *Kalah*, commanded an important place within the existing trading networks between Arabia and China (At-Tajir and as-Sirafi ca. 900CE, 69-215, cited from Arsyad Mokhtar, trans.; Yaapar, 2021). The scholars observed that during their journey, the Persian-Arab traders typically searched for and eventually brought back goods such as copper utensils, spices, medicinal products, and textiles. On another note, they introduced items like dates, frankincense, and horses into the Malay World and Far-Eastern markets (Ibn Khordazbeh ca. 870CE, 1-40, cited from Arsyad Mokhtar; Zuliskandar Ramli and Nik Hassan Nik Shuhaimi 2014, 85-104; Alnofli 2021, 1-35; Morley 1949, 143-176). In short, this indicates that the Straits of Malacca, the Straits of Hormuz, and their neighboring territories saw such robust trading and commercial activities. For many years to come, these aforementioned regions developed into a contentious area among certain prominent political entities within and beyond the regions who were competing for economic and political hegemony (Ahmad 2003, 1-330; Bramasto 2012, 1-23; Osman 1987, 7-77).

In relation to this, let us now look at the Straits of Malacca from a historical and geographical perspective followed by the Straits of Hormuz in order to appreciate their socioeconomic and geopolitical values. Historically, according to Andaya, the Straits of Malacca used to be known as the 'Sea of Melayu'. This reference is from an Arabic document that dates to the ninth Century A.D (Andaya and Andaya 2017, 1-300). Geographically, the Straits of Malacca links the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea; therefore, sailors and traders travelling from India and the Persian-Arab worlds must pass through the Straits of Malacca or, alternatively, through the Sunda Straits,



which, however, proved to be time-consuming (Vann 2014, 21-25; Evers and Gerke 2006, 1-17). This fact reinforced the Strait's central position in the old-world trading ecosystem, and it remains so today (this will be shown later via statistical data in the next discussion).

Interestingly, the Malacca Straits, located near the Malay Peninsula, later served as a stimulus for the emergence and expansion of port city kingdoms. Many traders and merchants travelling from across the Middle East were said to have used these early ports as convenient transit points while waiting for the monsoon to change before continuing their journey in other directions. The Straits also connected merchants and traders to other trading routes that went through the Malay Peninsula (Manguin, 2004). Based on archaeological evidence and scholarly literature, Takuapa or Langkasuka first appeared around the third century AD as one of the early Malay ports within the vicinity of the Straits of Malacca (Pires 1512-1515CE, 7-278, cited from Armando Cortesao, trans.; Manguin 2004, 283-313; Zuliskandar and Nik Hassan 2014, 85-104).

The Kingdom of Srivijaya, a notable Malay political entity, used to control two important trading networks simultaneously, namely the Straits of Malacca and the Straits of Sunda, which effectively brought the Kingdom substantial wealth and fame by requiring merchants and traders passing through the straits to pay port dues and taxes (Pearn 1965, 21-35). To summarize, the Kingdom lost its prominence in the 11th century AD, and Majapahit finally conquered it in 1025 AD (Manguin 2004, 283-313). The Majapahit Empire's defeat of Srivijaya marked the transfer of power base from Sumatra to Java. The Kingdom of Majapahit was founded by Raden Wijaya in 1293 (Hall 1960, 47-104). Hayam Wuruk led the kingdom to eventually be developed into an important political entity in the middle of the 14th century (Ricklefs 2001, 33-39). Majapahit territories, under the premiership of Gajah Mada, were expanded to include a number of the Malay

Archipelago islands, including the Straits of Malacca and Sunda (Pearn 1965, 21-35; Hall 1960; 301-335; Ricklefs 2001, 33-39).

The Kingdom of Malacca entered the scene with territorial authority over the Straits of Malacca after the collapse of Majapahit, via the cooperation of the *Orang Laut* who acknowledged the former's suzerainty over them (Ahmad 2003, 1-330; Yaapar 2019, 53-72). With the coming of Islam to the region, Malacca later emerged as a favorite port city for Muslim traders and merchants (Hall 1960, 283-296). When the Portuguese conquered Malacca in 1511, Malacca's glorious days came to an end as many Muslim traders and merchants escaped and chose to trade with other Malay port cities. This was primarily caused by the unfavorable circumstances in Malacca at the time (Pintado 2012, 2-290; Lockard 2008, 288-309; 412-438), as evidenced by the Portuguese's successful control of the Straits of Malacca using their naval superiority. They had imposed heavy taxes on merchant ships, forcing them to dock in Malacca. Other competing parties, such as the Dutch and Johor Sultanate, had continuously increased pressure on the Portuguese to defend the city port from falling from their grasp (Andaya and Andaya 2017, 1-300). The Portuguese colonial control of Malacca finally ended in 1640 when they were defeated by the combined forces of Dutch and Johore in 1641 (Harrison 1966, 50-100; Cleary and Chuan 2000, 85-86).

Following the visible strategic presence of another great colonial power in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, none other than Britain, the Dutch control over Malacca and some parts of territories in the Malay Peninsula was seriously challenged. For example, Britain began trading with Riau in the 1750s and eventually acquired the Dutch outpost of Perak in 1781. With the acquisition of Penang in 1786, British strategic interest in the Malay Peninsula became more visible. Since then, the British consistently sought out a few more profitable and strategically valuable areas, one of which was the establishment of a British port in Singapore in 1819. Consequently, this had led to intense

power struggles between the two colonial powers in the region. To counter British strategic interests, the Dutch attacked Riau and brought the territory under the former rule by defeating the Bugis forces and forcing them to flee to the neighboring Malay Peninsula and nearby islands. Nonetheless, in August 1795, the Dutch governor had to surrender Malacca to the British East India Company after the Napoleonic Wars broke out in the European theater in the late 1700s. However, the brief British occupation of Malacca came to an end in 1818 following the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, which saw the transference of Malacca to Dutch rule as a result of the Treaty of Vienna, signed in 1815 (Andaya and Andaya 2017, 1-300; K.G. Tregonning 1965, 1-160; Mohd Rusli Mohd Hazmi 2012, 109-127; Samuel Wee Tien Wang 1992, 1-39).

Nevertheless, the power struggle in the region did not end abruptly until the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty in 1824, which defined the sphere of British and Dutch influences in the Malay Archipelago. The treaty witnessed the cessation of Bencoolen to the Dutch and Malacca to the British. The treaty had significantly altered the geopolitical conditions surrounding the Straits and the Malay World at large. This included the British gaining dominance and a stronger grip on strategic areas in the Malay States, while the Malay Courts' control over their territories was diminishing. Furthermore, there was a significant loss of power on the part of the *Orang Laut*, who used to control and roam the Straits of Malacca in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to the hands of Bugis as a result of their presence in the Malay States. The latter had substantially wielded a strong influence in the Malay courts in economically and strategically rich Malay States such as Johor and Selangor. Nonetheless, this situation had soon drawn the British, Bugis, and Malay Courts into intense conflicts in the region. Britain eventually emerged victorious after several years of conflicts, expanding its dominance across the Malay Peninsula in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The British had successfully controlled the Malay States for many years to come, despite some real internal and

external challenges in ensuring that their grip in the country remained unshakeable, until the land that is known as Malaysia was granted independence on 31 August, 1957. The neighboring states of Indonesia and Singapore were also granted independence officially in 1949 and 1965, respectively (Andaya and Andaya 2017, 1-300; Ricklefs 2001, 143-311; Tarling 1962, 1-130; Ammarell 2002, 51-67; Ryan 1976, 1-200).

As such, it is clear from the persistent socio-geopolitical patterns in the region that the visible socio-political dynamism resulted from a series of socio-economic and political changes. This includes contests for economic and political hegemony among the local and international actors vying for control of the Straits of Malacca and neighboring territories. Interestingly, after colonialism and imperialism episodes in the region in the 20<sup>th</sup> century ended, such contests continue to take place among the newly-independent nation-states with their own fixed land and territorial borders governed by a set of modern principles and logics.

The Kingdom of Oman, a political entity situated in a remote corner of the globe, had also emerged as one of the significant trading centers in the Arabian Peninsula, with authority and jurisdiction over the Straits of Hormuz. Oman has long served as a distributed trading center between the Oriental and Occidental worlds. Additionally, Oman housed a number of important port cities, such as Sohar and Muscat, which facilitated further trading activities within a more extensive Indian Ocean trading network until the 15th century (At-Tajir and as-Sirafi ca. 900CE, 69-215, cited from Arsyad Mokhtar, trans.; Al-Mas'udi ca. 956CE, 1-464, cited from Aloys Sprenger, trans; and Ibn Khordazbeh ca. 870CE, 1-40, cited from Arsyad Mokhtar, trans; Al-Rahmhurmuzi 10<sup>th</sup> CE, 11-212, cited from Arsyad Mokhtar, trans.; Al-Hashimy 2015, 781-791; Islam 2010, 7-23). However, the Portuguese had conquered the Straits of Hormuz in the Arab Gulf in the early 16th century. Thus, this linked the two extreme ends of the major trading straits of the Indian

Ocean trade under the Portuguese administration, with Goa of India as its central outpost (Al-Jabri 2012, 38-200; Salman 2004, 49-246).

Geographically, Oman shares borders with the Republic of Yemen in the southwest, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the west, and the United Arab Emirates in the north. The Kingdom of Oman is also surrounded by the Arab Seas and neighboring islands (Al-Ghailani, 2017). The Kingdom has commercial and strategic links with the Malay World and Far Eastern markets via the Indian Ocean's maritime trade routes since many Persian-Arab traders found their way into distant trades (Osman, Gheraissa, and al-Zhumi 2022, 301-312; Nicolini 2016, 149-157). As of today, Oman is now a part of the global economic system, with many local and international cargoes passing through the Straits of Hormuz (Al-Jabri 2012, 38-200).

In the past, the port of Sohar, which was widely considered the gateway to China, was used to transport a substantial amount of Middle Eastern products, such as ivories and spices, into Far Eastern markets like China. An Arab geologist, Yagoot Hamayw, in his work entitled *Dictionary of Names of Places*, used to mention the port city of Sohar as "the gateway to China" (Al-Saadi 2012, 84-105; Wilkinson 1979, 808-907; Islam 2010, 7-23). The traveler's account by Sulaiman At-Tajir's was one of the earliest that depicted stories of Arabian Gulf travelers coming into contact with the Malay Peninsula coast. In the ninth century C.E., he was said to have visited the Malay World through similar routes used by other Arabian Gulf ships. His ships sailed through Muscat on their way to the Indian Ocean, until he passed through several territories and islands that surrounded the Indian subcontinent. He eventually arrived at the Malay port cities, largely due to the favourable monsoon system operating at that time (At-Tajir and as-Sirafi ca. 900CE, 69-215, cited from Arsyad Mokhtar, trans.; Al-Mas'udi ca. 956CE, 1-464, cited from Aloys Sprenger,

trans; Ibn Khordazbeh ca. 870CE, 1-40, cited from Arsyad Mokhtar, trans; Al-Rahmhurmuzi 10<sup>th</sup> CE, 11-212, cited from Arsyad Mokhtar, trans; Munoz 2006, 102-171).

These seafarers undoubtedly stopped at each port of call along the way to obtain food, wood, and other necessities. According to traveler's accounts such as that of al-Idrisi of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, these Arab-Persian traders were found wandering and roaming across the Indian Ocean and had certainly exchanged some goods (like Arabian horses) from Middle Eastern markets with those of Indian-Malay markets, such as spices, during their journey (Pires 1512-1515CE, 7-278, cited from Armando Cortesao, trans.; Ibn Khordazbeh ca. 870CE, 1-40, cited from Arsyad Mokhtar, trans.; Yaapar 2019, 53-72; Zuliskandar and Nik Hassan 2014, 85-104; Alnofli 2021, 1-35; Islam 2010, 7-23; Osman et. al. 2018, 12).

The Portuguese, as one of the earliest Western powers to reach the Far East, recognized the importance of the Indian Ocean trade and colonized the Ormuzian territory in 1508 CE before moving on to colonize Malacca, one of the most important port cities in the Malay World, in 1511 CE. However, further observation revealed that the Arabian trade to the east, which bypassed the Portuguese terminus, did not experience a long setback when the colonizers were expelled by the natives in Oman in the 1620s and in the Malay Peninsula in the 1650s; instead, a new era of Indo-Muslim mercantile empire began. Similarly, the Kingdom of Oman had to face the possibility of closure by a certain European power, as well as occasional piracy attacks on their shores, which greatly weakened control and stability of the Straits. Unfortunately, the Straits fell into the hands of the Portuguese when they were able to subdue Oman in the early 1500s. Thereafter, the Portuguese expanded their control to Goa in India, and, in 1511, to the Sultanate of Malacca. The Portuguese were able to strategically link these major shipping lanes under a single control, and most importantly, maintain control over the flow into and out of the locations. After many years,

the Omanis under the Yaruba dynastic rule successfully expelled the Portuguese from the region in the early 1600s (Al-Jabri 2012, 38-200; Salman 2004, 49-246; Ibn Ruzaiq 2012, 1-371, cited from Robert Percy Badger, trans.; Fukuda 1992, 1-16).

Therefore, it is obvious that the strategic and economic values of the Straits of Malacca and the Straits of Hormuz had benefited not only the Malaya Peninsula and Oman, but also the states bordering the Straits. In the past, the Straits were undoubtedly the lifeline for the Malays and Omanis and continue to be so today (statistics indicate a high volume of exports and imports through these two major shipping lanes in the world), to the point where the possibility of intense power struggles that may result in blockades and a high possibility of ship collisions or piracy attacks in the concerned areas would greatly undermine their geopolitical and economic standings to the rest of the world.

The same historical patterns continue to emerge as there are still constant power and economic struggles between and among local and international actors that began in the past and are present today, albeit with different players and world systems. Undeniably, the challenges and obstacles that the concerned parties must overcome are much more complex and require appropriate approaches to the issues at stake. This has certainly highlighted the fact that the Straits are constantly vulnerable to serious threats, within and beyond the regions, due to the ever-changing world situation. This is the case given the geopolitics and economic significance of the Straits to the concerned parties.

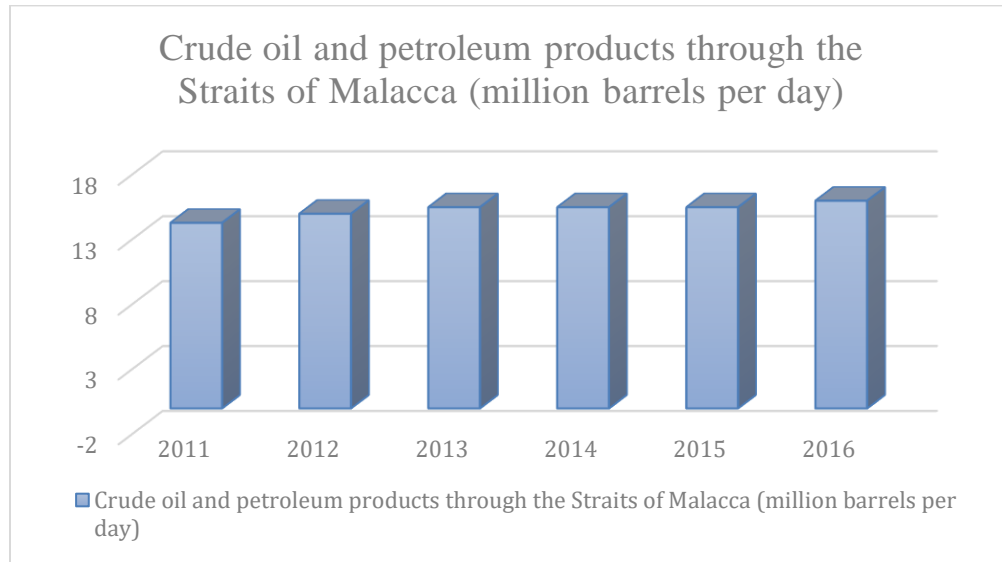
To illustrate this, according to the U.S Energy Information Administration (2017), the Straits of Malacca, which is the second-largest oil trade chokepoint in the world after the Straits of Hormuz, was traversed by nearly one-third of the 61% of the total global petroleum and other liquid production that moved on maritime routes in 2015. It is reported that oil and gas products passing

through the Straits of Malacca has steadily increased over the past five years, reaching 16 million barrels per day (b/d) in 2016. Additionally, a substantial amount of liquefied natural gas (LNG) products from the Persian Gulf and African countries made their way through the Straits of Malacca to the East Asian markets with growing LNG demand (Noraini, Sharifah Munirah and Zarina 2014, 80-98; Siti Zubaidah and Mohd Azizuddin 2010, 83-105; Evers and Hornidge 2007, 417-33; Qu and Meng 2012, 1-14). Japan and South Korea are the biggest importers of LNG in the region.

As a result, should an unprecedented situation such as a blockade of the Straits of Malacca by any party were to occur, approximately half of the world's shipping fleet would be required to circumvent around the Indonesian archipelago. Consequently, this will have an impact on shipping capacity and prices globally. On the same note, D.B. Freeman reinforced the fact that the Straits of Malacca remains the most viable shipping route for ships and cargoes coming from the Indian and Persian Gulf's port cities as well as ships sailing from the European continent through the Suez Canal-Red Sea route for major East Asian port cities (Energy Information Administration (EIA) 2012, 1; Mohd Hazmi 2012, 109-127; Shepard and Pratson 2020, 1-20; Al-Jabri 2012, 38-200). The size of crude oil and petroleum products transported through the Straits of Malacca from 2011 until 2016 is depicted in Table 1.



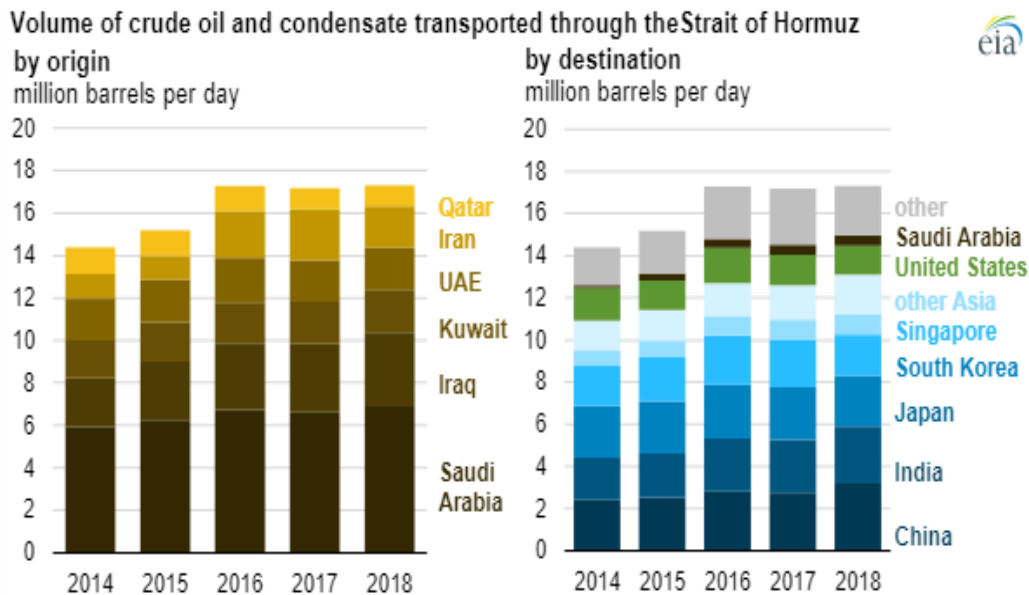
Table 1: Crude oil and petroleum products through the Straits of Malacca (million barrels per day)



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2017 World Oil Transit Chokepoints

On another end, the Straits of Hormuz has long been considered as the most important strategic passing route in the world because a significant amount of oil and gas products pass through the Straits from Europe and the Persian-Arab worlds to the Eastern markets. In 2018, it was reported that about 21 million barrels per day of oil and gas products passed through the Straits, accounting for about 21% of all global petroleum liquid usage. In addition, it is important to note that the liquefied natural gas trade accounts for more than a quarter of global usage, with oil and gas flow from the Straits constituting about a third of the total global seaborne traded oil (EIA 2019, 1; Shepard and Pratson 2020, 1-20; Al-Jabri 2012, 38-200; Ghunatilanke 2021, 1-25). Nonetheless, the Strait remains vulnerable to internal and external factors as the inability of oil and gas products to transit via a major chokepoint, even temporarily, can lead to substantial supply delays and higher shipping costs, resulting in higher world energy prices. Table 2 shows the volume of crude oil and condensate transported through the Straits of Hormuz, by origin and destination.

Table 2: Volume of crude oil and condensate transported through the Strait of Hormuz (by origin and by destination)



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, based on tanker tracking data published by ClipperData, Inc.

Therefore, the Straits of Hormuz has consistently remained at the centre of the world’s economic activities, as shown by the above figures. The experts, in fact, acknowledged that there is a high volume of oil and gas products passing through the Straits, which is why one may deduce that not only the Strait itself, but also the surrounding areas, have become a contentious point for local and global players to assert and maintain their strategic interests (EIA 2019, 1; Salin and Kilic 2020, 29-59). As such, it is an indisputable truth that the Strait of Hormuz plays a dominant role in the global economy, as much as it relies on the stability and security of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf as a whole (Shepard and Pratson 2020, 1-20; Al-Jabri 2012, 38-200; Salin and Kilic 2020, 29-59).

It is also important to note that a substantial number of oil and gas products intended for East Asian markets travel through the Strait (EIA 2019, 1). The oil-producing countries must have realized

the Strait's vulnerability to a blockade as a result of the competing powers in the Middle Eastern conflicts, hence, they have attempted to build alternative transportation routes to ensure that their crude oil transportation remains unhindered (EIA 2019, 1; Salin and Kilic 2020, 29-59). Overall, this has certainly demonstrated the centrality of the two Straits within the world trading ecosystem.

Nonetheless, the continuous economic and political battle between the United States and China as well as the endless Middle East conflict have jeopardized the current world situation. Given their proximity to the growing unstable situations, Malaysia and the Kingdom of Oman must endure these conflicts because they have a direct or indirect impact on every country across the globe. In this regard, given the current political and economic world situations, particularly the rapid rise of China's global dominance, Malaysia and the Kingdom of Oman undeniably face much more intense challenges and obstacles than before. Two vivid scenarios are the trade battle with the United States and China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, as well as the endless Middle East conflict in the Arab World and the Persian Gulf. This has certainly alerted the concerned countries given their geopolitical and strategic interests in the matter.

China's growing global prominence has alarmed the United States, resulting in a series of 'cold battles' between high-ranking officials from the two major economic powers. The most obvious entanglements are trade battles and military build-up. (Kapustina, Lipkova, Silin, and Drevalov 2020, 1-13; Coxhead 2022, 1). China's claims over certain territories in the South China Sea have further strained the relationship between the parties involved in Malaysia and a few other Southeast Asian countries. This Chinese claim is known as the "nine-dotted line". The International Arbitration Tribunal refuted China's claims to the South China Sea in July 2016, citing UNCLOS provisions. However, China refused to acknowledge the Tribunal's decision. Since then, China has consistently altered the disputed reefs into a sort of protected military base. The other claimant

parties and international actors like the United States have been understandably irritated by this (Hideshi 2013, 1-10). As such, the leaders of Southeast Asia have unanimously agreed that the Ocean Treaty of 1982 should continue to serve as a framework for regulating, determining, and resolving any claim of disputed waters in the South China Sea among Sovereign countries. The leaders reaffirmed their conviction on the said principle at the ASEAN Summit held on 26 June 2020 (Hideshi 2013, 1-10).

The main priorities for the United States are maintaining the status quo in the region, including safe strait navigation, no restrictions on the Asian ocean common to all, and strict compliance to international law regarding any sea and territorial disputes. As such, the common modus operandi by the United States in the Asia Pacific region and adjacent waters is characterized by her emphasis on “bolstering relations with treaty allies in the Asia Pacific, while at the same time reinforcing contributions to multilateral organizations in the region; secondly, maintaining a strong military presence in the region to maintain access to the ocean and freedom of actions that adhere to international law; and lastly, placing American naval power as the main actor promoting international rules-based order”. Therefore, it is expected that the United States will continue to remind China to conform its maritime claims to international law, as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention and the ruling of the International Arbitration Tribunal, which convened in July 2016 (Hideshi 2013, 1-10; Spanier, Orin, and Rettig 2021, 6-66).

On another scale, Oman’s Straits of Hormuz are unfortunately also experiencing political and economic uncertainties, primarily due to the United States’ fear of Iran’s nuclear power plant, as well as occasional collisions and piracy attacks in the area. A vivid example of this occurred on May 8, 2018, when President Trump of the United States announced their unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran that had been signed earlier during the Obama administration with

the European bloc. Iran's attempts to bolster its army and weapons had led to this reaction from Trump (Kerr and Katzman 2018, 1-28; Al-Jabri 2012, 38-200).

He also gave the green light to reinstate previously suspended embargoes and economic blockades (Kerr and Katzman 2018, 1-28). The United States has historically imposed on Iran a series of economic sanctions related to various politico-economic issues since 1980. Iran undoubtedly suffered greatly as a result of these economic sanctions, but the country tried to mitigate the impact of such sanctions through a number of initiatives, such as “zeroing the imports, preventing investments in the oil and natural gas sector, and blacklisting of its Iranian banks”. On top of that, in order to reduce its dependency on the West, Iran began to establish closer links with Eastern powers like Russia and China (Goldenberg, Schwed and Thomas 2019, 6-53; Katzman, McInnis and Thomas 2020, 1-21).

Geopolitical-economic vulnerabilities would therefore cause significant turmoil to the world economic ecosystem, especially if the following conflicts continue to deteriorate in the coming years. According to the researcher, the uncertainty persists and necessitates strategic approaches from the concerned parties to mitigate the effects of such conflicts through non-coercive means. However, the international players will be most affected by the possibility of closure as well as occasional piracy attacks and ship collisions along these Straits.

## **CONCLUSION**

Interestingly, certain noticeable historical patterns that have persisted in the past and present have also visibly revealed some socio-geopolitical changes that occur in the regions due to different social and political forces at play. These historical continuities include constant struggles for

economic and political hegemony among and between local and global actors in the concerned regions, which pose continuous threats to the socio-political and economic security of the regions, in addition to the high likelihood of piracy attacks. This is mainly because both Straits are economically and strategically instrumental for the competitors. More importantly, this is also precisely the type of socio-economic and political dynamism that existed in the two Straits and their neighboring countries even before the arrival of Westerners in the region. The world is now governed by a set of modern standards and conventions that those local and global players have never encountered before, making the present realities undeniably more complex and vibrant.

All of these complex situations create high uncertainties around the Straits and their neighboring states, eventually putting the security and stability of the Straits at crossroads. In hindsight, these situations are very likely to occur given the geopolitical and economic positions of both Straits within the world economic system, which if disrupted, would affect both local and international actors. Therefore, the parties involved must, without fail, ensure that the Straits remain safe for navigation and trade; otherwise, unwanted repercussions may occur beyond our imagination. It is also clear to us that these uncertainties must be handled diplomatically without intimidation or fear. It goes without saying both local and international actors must, to some extent, forego their egos and be willing to work together for a brighter future. Nonetheless, it appears to be a difficult task as many are unwilling to do so given their geopolitics and strategic interests at stake.

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