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A priceless maritime heritage

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A priceless maritime heritage

Abstract

THE Straits of Malacca and Singapore Strait have been vital shipping routes for international trade for hundreds of years. The region around the Straits of Malacca and Singapore Strait is steeped in a long and continuous history of trade, shipping, colonisation and the race towards attaining political and economic supremacy, both before and during the age of European dominion.

The Straits of Malacca was initially known as the “Sea of Malayu”. The first reference to the “Sea of Malayu” was from an Arabic document dating back to the 9th century AD, noting the Malay influence in the region. Both the Straits of Malacca and Singapore Strait were largely responsible for the emergence and downfall of various kingdoms along their length, some of which did develop into regional maritime empires and important trading centres.

Srivijaya, Majapahit and Malacca were great kingdoms of the past that used to dominate this region. Malacca prospered until 1511 as a crucial link in world trade. It was said that the city of Malacca was as large as other European cities at that time, such as Naples and Paris. The profound influence of the Malacca sultanate, which dominated the straits for over a century, is evident with the name the Straits of Malacca carries up to this day.

Keywords

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After the sacking of Malacca in 1511, the Portuguese established a fort in the new Portuguese-Malacca. They had high hopes that with this new colony, they could establish a stronghold in the Malay Archipelago. However, the taking of Malacca by the Portuguese did not mean that the Portuguese were free from opposition from other Malay powers in that region.

The fall of Malacca led to the founding of the Johor sultanate, established by the prince of the ousted Sultan of Malacca. Johor inherited much of the area that used to be under the influence of the Malacca sultanate. The fall of Malacca also gave rise to the Aceh sultanate in north Sumatra. By the mid-16th century, Aceh’s power grew significantly and it attempted to bring the Straits of Malacca under its dominance. At this time, the tripartite struggle between Portuguese-Malacca, Aceh and Johor to control the Straits of Malacca erupted and continued for the next hundred years. There was no absolute winner in this battle. Aceh launched several attacks on Malacca which managed to weaken the Portuguese, but these ended in vain.

Johor also made several attempts to re-capture Malacca but these were ultimately unsuccessful. The arrival of the Dutch in the 17th century in the Malay World gave Johor the opportunity to rebuild its strength as the Malay overlord in the Straits of Malacca region. Both the Dutch and the Johoreans sought each other’s friendship as a counterweight against the Portuguese and the Acehnese.

The Portuguese were driven away from the Straits of Malacca region permanently in 1641.

The British were the next European power to expand their influence over the Straits of Malacca region. In 1786, the British settled on the island of Penang and Singapore in 1819. The presence of the Dutch in the Malay Peninsula was considered by the British authorities to be detrimental to the British policy of maintaining good relations with the Dutch government in Europe. Consequently, the British and the Dutch entered into the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of London in 1824 under which the Dutch gave up all their territories in mainland Asia to the British, which included Malacca, and in return the British agreed not to spread their dominions into the Malay Archipelago, south of Singapore. This treaty divided the Straits of Malacca region into two spheres which has lasted even until the present.

The efforts of the British to establish trading posts in Penang in 1786, Malacca in 1824 and Singapore in 1819 were timely, as the Suez Canal was opened in 1869. Vessels from East Asian nations could sail to Europe via the shorter Straits of Malacca and Singapore-Suez Canal-Mediterranean Sea route, ultimately bypassing the conventional longer route around the African continent.

Upon independence in 1957, Malaya resumed the rights and obligations that Britain held over the Straits of Malacca and Singapore Strait during the colonial era. Malaya then merged with Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak to form the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. On Aug 9, 1965, Singapore became an independent island republic, subsequent to its separation from the Malaysian Federation.

This historical background shows that the Straits of Malacca played a significant role in shaping the character of this region. The political will to seek dominion over the Straits of Malacca has always been motivated by the desire to control and monopolise the trade that goes through it. The historical significance of the Straits of Malacca has resulted in Malacca and Georgetown in Penang, two former British Strait settlements, to be designated as World Heritage Sites by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) in 2008. Straits of Malacca and Singapore Strait remained important for international trade until today.

In the eyes of the international shipping community, the Straits of Malacca and Singapore Strait are seen as strategic sea lines of communication that facilitate global trade as they form the shortest route connecting the Middle-Eastern oil suppliers with the economies of East Asia, namely China, Japan and South Korea.

In 2004, it was reported that more than 900 ships sailed the Singapore Strait every day, which meant that one ship would pass the Singapore Strait every 1.6 minutes. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news reported in 2010 that yearly, the Straits of Malacca and Singapore Strait accommodate almost six times the volume of navigational traffic that goes through the Suez Canal. The Straits of Malacca and Singapore are predicted to accommodate more than 140,000 vessel movements annually by 2020. An estimated 11 million barrels of oil pass through Malacca and Singapore straits daily.

In terms of navigational traffic, the Malacca and Singapore straits came second only to the Dover Strait. Yearly, oil tankers make up the second biggest fraction of the types of vessel plying the Malacca and Singapore straits, after container vessels. Besides China and the United States, the other East Asian economies of Japan and South Korea rely heavily on the the Malacca and Singapore straits to transport their oil needs from their Middle-Eastern suppliers. Statistical data issued by the American Association of Port Authorities in 2011 have shown that most of the world's busiest ports are located in Southeast Asia — Singapore and Port Klang — to name a few.

Due to the maritime geographical features of Southeast Asia, shipping provides the most convenient way to establish trade across the vast expanse of the region. If these straits are closed for navigation, ships will be forced to traverse the longer Lombok and Makassar routes through Indonesian archipelagic waters, inevitably adding to shipping costs. As a result, the navigational distance for ships in its normal voyage between Aden in Yemen and Yokohama in Japan would be extended by 1000 nautical miles. This would mean an extra shipping cost of US\$500,000 (RM1.6 million) per ship per transit for a large vessel, such as a very large crude carrier (VLCC). As such, the Malacca and Singapore straits are important for reducing transportation costs. Any interference with the free flow of maritime traffic through these waterways would be detrimental for international trade and the global economy.

Malaysia is truly blessed for having the Malacca and Singapore straits on its shores. The fact that some designated areas along the Straits are World Heritage Sites manifests that these waterways are more than just an important shipping route. Undoubtedly, these straits possess invaluable cultural, historical and socio-economic significance. For these reasons, it is not too excessive to articulate that collectively, the Straits of Malacca and Singapore Strait are Malaysia's priceless maritime heritage.