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The Strategic Weight of Maritime Choke Points: Cautionary Lessons for Malaysia

By
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Maritime choke points continue to present strategic risks for littoral states with adjacent access and control of these choke points. Malaysia is one such littoral state straddling a few critical maritime choke points. A military expedition that was launched to capture a strategic maritime choke point 108 years ago provides us with valuable strategic and cautionary lessons.

The Gallipoli campaign was an attempt by British and ANZAC forces during First World War I in 1915 to capture the Gallipoli area from the Ottoman Empire, destroy its coastal batteries, dominate the heights of the Dardanelles Straits leading to the Sea of Marmara, and to facilitate the combined British and French fleets to control the Bosphorus Strait leading into the Black Sea.

The Bosphorus Strait, Sea of Marmara and Dardanelles Strait were and still are today, some of the most important and strategic sea lanes of communication and maritime choke points of the world. The importance of these waterways for shipping in and out of the Black Sea, as highlighted in ongoing Russo-Ukraine conflict, are paramount and eternal for the region. The Gallipoli campaign, as we all know, failed with horrendous losses suffered by the British and ANZAC forces as well as the defending Ottoman forces.

This strategic history strikes as a valuable lesson to understand the strategic utility of choke points and the risks of these choke points being controlled or denied access by belligerent powers today such as in a possible future war in Southeast Asia's backyard.

Maritime Choke Points

Maritime choke points are typically narrow waterways that serve as important sea lanes of communication (SLOC) for both merchant and naval shipping that could be easily blockaded, for example by mines, or controlled by foreign powers' naval forces or forcibly occupying the coastal land areas (such as the attempt in the Gallipoli campaign).

Southeast Asia has a few maritime choke points that are interconnected and interrelated. The focus of this commentary are the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea choke points. These two choke points are close to Malaysia and are some of the busiest waterways in the world. The premise of this commentary is on the potential risk of a war erupting over Taiwan and its impact to the region.

Sino-Taiwan tensions have increased over the last couple of years. In the backdrop of ongoing US-China competition, Taiwan continues to be a major powder keg for a future conflict in the region. If a war ever breaks out, these aforementioned two choke points will be strategically important for all belligerents, and there will certainly be attempts to fight for control or denial of access to these choke points.

There may be three plausible consequences if a war erupts: firstly, there could be unilateral declaration restricting specific waters by naval blockades; secondly, it could lead to disruptions of shipping SLOCs; thirdly, sea denial tactics in obstructing SLOCs could be conducted by warring parties.

The Strait of Malacca is one of the key SLOC that belligerent powers will strive to control. The Strait is 500 miles (800 km) long and from 40 to 155 miles (65–250 km) wide, between the Peninsular Malaysia to the east and the Indonesian island of Sumatra to the west. It has served as the major maritime SLOC and a major choke point for centuries, connecting the east and western trade routes. It is estimated that more than 90,000 merchant ships, transporting about 25% of the world trade value, pass through the Strait of Malacca annually. The Strait of Malacca also provides an important conduit to the South China Sea, and further into the Pacific Ocean, reinforcing its supreme geostrategic importance.

The South China Sea is also another large maritime choke point which leads to the Taiwan Strait and the Bashi and Miyako channels. The South China Sea has numerous littoral states bordering it or rather containing it, namely Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and China.

According to the statistics of United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the South China Sea carries about one-third of global shipping. Two of Asia's largest economies rely on the South China Sea for maritime shipping and trade namely China with 64% and Japan with 42% of its shipping traversing the sea.

Strategic Risks in Southeast Asia

With the intense great power competition between the US, China and their strategic allies, the risk of conflict breaking out is higher today. And if a conflict does break out, the maritime choke points of the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea will be major choke points that foreign powers would want to control or deny their usage.

Blockades may be conducted via close blockade with the presence of combat vessels or through the closing of important SLOCs with mines and submarines. These may result in rerouting of merchant shipping with high risks of being captured as war prize or being sunk, which will translate to higher shipping costs and exorbitant insurance rates. Obviously, global trade and supply chains, as well as the global economy, will be directly disrupted with tragic consequences.

It is estimated that if the Strait of Malacca is closed or blockaded for a week, with shipping diverted through the Lombok and Sunda Straits, it would result in an additional US\$64.5 million

in shipping costs. If all three choke points are closed, with shipping forced to take longer reroutes, this will result in an additional monthly shipping costs of US\$2.8 billion.

While the strategic risks on maritime zones are grave, it does not end there. The littoral land and air spaces also face serious perils. The potential capture of adjacent littoral land to control these choke points, especially the Strait of Malacca, may likely take place. Remember the Gallipoli campaign mentioned earlier - this means that Peninsular Malaysia or Sumatra or Singapore may be at the risk of foreign intervention to capture littoral land areas so as to seize control of the Strait of Malacca.

Foreign powers may also strive to destroy port/bunkering facilities along or near these choke points to prevent their usage by both naval and merchant shipping. Neutral and non-belligerent states may also be affected by these strategic interdiction strikes.

Non-belligerent neutral states straddling these choke points will struggle to protect their own shipping and ports. There is also the potential danger of collateral damage or accidental sinkings by belligerent powers battling each other in adjacent maritime areas.

Cautionary Lessons

These dark predictions lead us to the favourite strategic question. So what?

The typical argument to mitigate these potential risks in Southeast Asia is to use our sole regional body of ASEAN to manage or mitigate and prevent any conflicts from erupting, using various diplomatic channels and platforms.

But, as strategic history has warned and reminded us about the prevalence of war in our long-recorded history, what if a conflict does happen in our backyard? How do we deal with it? Are we ready? What if we get the future wrong?

These are important, pertinent and urgent questions that must be deliberated. To prepare for the uncertain future, we must prepare for the worst-case scenario. Only by doing that, even if we are surprised by the future, we are (hopefully) able to recover fast enough from the initial shocks and respond decisively.

Although a littoral state may declare itself as neutral or non-aligned, when war does happen in its backyard, it may be unwillingly dragged into the conflict. And even if the littoral state is not directly involved in the war, it will still suffer potential side effects, such as the disruption of shipping, accidental attacks on its merchant ships, chaos in international trading, interruption in energy and food supplies, and breakdown of global supply chains, leading to the catastrophic collapse of the global economy.

What if a foreign power conducts a blockade or closure of the aforementioned maritime choke points? How does a littoral state protect or keep these choke points neutral and open? Does it have the resources to start building formidable navies, air forces, coastal and land defence capabilities (remember Gallipoli) to safeguard these key nodes?

These multi-domain and multi-spectrum capability and capacity building incur high costs in acquisition of platforms and assets, training of personnel and importantly, maintaining them in the future. This translates to massive investments today and even more steadfast political

willpower in initiating sustainable long-term spending on defence. Some of these key questions are difficult to answer but must be duly addressed.

Conclusion

While it is important to revisit common options to prevent war from erupting, the Malaysian government and defence establishment must also, however, think about the unthinkable. Lessons from strategic history such as the Gallipoli campaign, have shown that belligerent powers will strive to capture control of strategic choke points not just on the sea but also on land during war. Malaysia must be prepared for the worst-case scenario and start taking concrete steps today to build and acquire aspired naval, air and land platforms and assets, as well as technological and methodical capabilities.

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