Cooperation in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore

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1 Introduction

It is of critical importance for both the littoral and user States of the Straits of Malacca and Singapore to ensure navigational safety and environmental protection in the Straits. As a framework for multi-stakeholder cooperation in the Straits, the “Cooperative Mechanism” was endorsed in the meeting organized by the IMO and the littoral States in Singapore in 2007. This Mechanism, which realized the spirit and intent of Article 43 of UNCLOS, has been successful in attracting support by a large variety of stakeholders of the Straits. However, in order to cope with significantly increasing traffic volume, safety measures should be maintained and upgraded by further coordinated actions through the Cooperative Mechanism.

This paper will examine developments of the Cooperative Mechanism for the Malacca and Singapore Straits.

2 Characteristics of the Straits of Malacca and Singapore

The Straits of Malacca and Singapore (Straits) constitute one of the most important sea routes in the world. Different coordinates have been used to geographically describe these Straits, however this paper will adopt the definition of the Straits as a 500km long sea lane between Horsburgh Lighthouse as the eastern end and One Fathom Bank Lighthouse as the western end. Navigational safety is of great concern in these waterways and therefore safety measures, such as a Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS) and mandatory reporting system have been implemented by the littoral States. The Straits connect the Pacific and Indian Oceans, but most of the 500km area of the Straits falls within the territorial waters of three littoral States, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia and

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Singapore. Consequently, the Straits are regarded as “straits used for international navigation” under Part III of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).\(^1\)

The Straits provide the shortest route connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It would take two to three more days to navigate through alternative routes such as the Sunda Straits and the Lonbok Straits located in Indonesian waters. This fact makes the Straits irreplaceable for international trade. Approximately 40\% of world trade and 50\% of crude oil is carried through the Straits.\(^2\) For Japan, the largest user of the Straits, 80\% of its oil imports is transported through the Straits.

Despite the critical importance of the Straits, navigational safety is at risk because of obstacles such as narrow passageways, shoals and hidden ship wrecks. The world’s longest traffic separation scheme (TSS), which extends for 500 kilometers, was established in the Straits in 1998 with the approval of the International Maritime Organization (IMO).\(^3\) At the same time, a mandatory ship reporting system named “STRAITREP” came into force in this sea area.\(^4\) This safety measure was introduced also with the approval IMO.

Maritime traffic volume has increased year by year along with the economic growth of East and Southeast Asian countries. In 2010, 74,133 vessels transited the Straits.\(^5\) This number is 32\% larger than 55,957 vessels in 2000. Even though traffic volume dipped by 7.6\% due to economic slump in 2009, it has dramatically increased during the past ten years.\(^6\)

A considerable number of accidents involving transiting ships have occurred in the last decades. Some of them caused serious oil pollution which severely affected marine environment and livelihood of the littoral States’ coastal communities. Even after safety measures such as TSS and STRAITREP were introduced, the Straits have been an accident-prone sea area where forty accidents including twenty-two collisions occurred between 1999 and 2010.\(^7\)

The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) of Japan made a projection that traffic volume in the Straits would increase by

\(^{2}\) Marine Department, Malaysia, at the 4th Cooperation Forum, October 2011.
\(^{3}\) IMO Doc. res. MSC(69)73, 19 May 1998.
\(^{4}\) Ibid.
\(^{5}\) The number of vessels which reported to Klang VTS (Vessel Traffic Service) / Data from Marine Department of Peninsular Malaysia. Official Website of Marine Department of Peninsular Malaysia http://www.marine.gov.my/jlmeng/pic/article/Numbers_of_Ships.Reporting_Under_STRAITREP.pdf.
\(^{6}\) Ibid.
\(^{7}\) Marine Department, Malaysia, at the 4th Cooperation Forum, October 2011.