

Sino-American rivalry over the strategic Strait of Malacca

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Abstract;

Research issues on the geopolitics of sea lanes and ports are among the most important issues in international affairs, as they present several variables due to the international competition of major powers over them, especially since the strategic importance of straits and sea lanes represents one of the geopolitical dimensions influencing the paths of building international relations, as they represent elements of geopolitics and have a direct impact on the economic, security and military aspects associated with the competing international powers.

This paper will examine the variables explaining the geopolitical importance of the strategic Strait of Malacca, as it is characterized by international competition between China and the United States of America, and is considered the most important transit point for trade and maritime navigation between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and also constitutes a vital corridor for global trade (oil and gas), and the security of maritime sovereignty.

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1. Introduction

The Strait of Malacca represents a vital maritime corridor for global trade, particularly for transporting energy (oil and gas) from producing to consuming areas. As a result, it has become a maritime outlet subject to competition between the regional and international naval powers, including the United States, China, India, and Japan. This competition is aimed at extending maritime dominance over the shipping lanes leading to the Strait of Malacca.

Similarly, China has adopted a strategy known as the "Pearl Necklace," which aims to maintain oil supplies and industrial exports. This strategy has involved the modernization of China's military capabilities on the high seas, with the objective of exerting control over the South China Sea and Malacca Strait. Meanwhile, the United States is strengthening geopolitical and military influence in the Pacific region. With a focus on the strategic importance of the Strait of Malacca within its broader security orientations, and to counter China's growing influence in the East and Southeast Asian regions.

Both China and the United States recognize the potential consequences of a lack of security or any form of bottleneck along this sea lane. Such a situation could cause major disruptions in the oil market and lead to a supply crisis that could adversely affect oil prices and stock levels in major industrialized countries that rely heavily on fuel as an energy source.

Problem of the study: Through this paper, we will try to explain the variables and

dimensions driving the Sino-American competition over the Malacca Strait, based on answering the following question: What are the geopolitical dimensions of the Strait of Malacca, according to the Sino-American rivalry perspective?

Methodological approaches

The geopolitical approach was used in this study, as it is the optimal framework for analyzing the importance of geographical areas and natural determinants within the framework of the strategic perspective of countries. In order to ensure security and economic immunity to achieve its national interests. Especially in the case of competition between major powers (China and the United States of America) over areas of geopolitical and economic importance such as the strategic Strait of Malacca.

2. Straits: strategic oceanic interfaces

Straits play a pivotal role in facilitating maritime transportation. International maritime traffic is increasingly concentrated in straits, as evidenced by the observations of Jean-Claude Lasserre (J.C, 2003, p. 198). These straits are characterized by their geostrategic importance in the economic sphere, acting as conduits for maritime traffic and global trade, including the transportation of oil, cargo, and industrial vehicles. Moreover, these corridors include several strategic straits that facilitate navigation on the world's oceans. However, some of these straits are located in areas prone to tensions and security issues between competing international powers, which increases the risks of maritime

navigation, especially at key points of trade and oil distribution. These areas include the most important maritime choke points in the world, which can be monitored as follows: Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz, Strait of Bab al-Mandeb, Strait of Bosphorus, Suez Canal, and Panama Canal (Bakir, 2010, p. 171).

2.1 Maritime Straits (Conceptual Study)

The term 'narrow waterway' is used to describe a geographical space that connects two seas or oceans. These waterways are formed when accumulations of refraction or continuous water movement on lowlands create a natural channel or waterway. Over time, these waterways are subject to geographical transformations, which can result in the creation of artificial waterways (Ghanem, 1960, p. 63), such as the Suez Canal in Egypt.

Additionally, they can be defined as maritime passages, which are subject to varying degrees of restriction between the two coasts that border them and connect two stretches of the sea of significant economic and strategic importance. These passages of the sea form a connecting route between two seas or a waterway at the closest point of two continents. They are characterized by economic activity as gateways for routes from one sea to the other and include major ports at the confluence of sea and land routes (Marcadon, 2004, p. 295).

Seas and oceans account for 73% of the world's surface area. The navigation of civil and military ships is significantly constrained by a network of expansive international straits and channels that serve as primary maritime thoroughfares. The safety and security of these routes is a matter of international concern, as their obstruction could have severe economic, political, and security implications (Catherine Biaggi, 2024, p. 1).

The sea lanes serve as a conduit for maritime connecting between destinations on both sides of the seas and oceans. They fulfill a variety of functions, including facilitating the movement of economic activity, particularly the supply of global trade on the high seas; enabling the movement of global transportation and tourism; and allowing the movement of military operations on the high seas (Al-Awar, 1999, p. 163).

The global economy's increasing maritime orientation has led to a heightened significance of straits, which act as gateways for commercial shipping and activities. This is particularly evident in geostrategic areas where international competition is most intense. In comparison, other straits around the world vary in importance due to their geopolitical location, climate, and dynamics. Furthermore, the number of global mandatory transit points in maritime navigation is limited because not all of the numerous sea lanes possess the

same geostrategic, geopolitical, or economic value. This is dependent upon the nature of the interests of states, which are in turn shaped by their respective national interests. The hierarchical arrangements of straits in maritime navigation are not fixed; rather, they are contingent upon the importance and trajectory of each strait in its functional integration into the needs of the global economy. For example, the Strait of the Cape of Good Hope, which was of central importance for centuries, has seen its significance decline in comparison to the Strait of Malacca in the present era (Jean-Pierre, 2010, p. 219).

From a geopolitical perspective, these straits and channels are of great importance to major countries as they represent one of the most significant maritime routes for the transportation of merchandise, crude oil, and gas. In the event of security issues affecting these sea channels, a state of suffocation or closure would have a negative impact on the international economic process, particularly when it comes to energy issues. The latter enters industrialized countries in a supply crisis that affects oil prices and the level of their reserves (Catherine Biaggi, 2024, p. 4).

The security of sea lanes is of vital importance to the largest energy-consuming countries, including China, the United States of America, Japan, and India. It is important to highlight that the principle

of freedom of maritime traffic in navigating through international straits is recognized for all civilian and military ships, without the need for a prior request from the riparian state. This is provided that the transit is harmless, continuous, and rapid, that is to say, without disturbing the order of navigation or the security of the riparian state of the strait. It is the responsibility of the state in question to ensure the safety and security of navigation in the strait, as this is explicitly included in international treaties (Catherine Biaggi, 2024, p. 5).

2.2 Geopolitical Dimension of the Strategic Straits of Malacca

The Strait of Malacca is one of the world's most competitive waterways due to its strategic geographical location for the international economic process and even for countries competing regionally in Southeast Asia. The latter is characterized by being the longest shipping strait in the world, with a length of approximately 800 km and a width ranging from 50 to 320 km, where we find the narrowest point up to 2.5 km wide, while its depth is approximately 23 meters. Geographically, this strait is characterized by its natural connection with the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Pacific Ocean, which makes it a center for the intersection of trade between Europe and Asia in the Pacific Ocean (Storey, 2006, p. 5). In 2023, some 80 350 ships transited the various strategic global shipping lanes. The Strait of Malacca

attracted 18.5% of the total, followed by the Taiwan Strait with 18%, the Strait of Pas de-Calais with 15%, and Gibraltar with 12.3%. While 17 800 Ships passed through the Cape of Good Hope, only 1 600 Ships passed through the Strait of Magellan (Catherine Biaggi, 2024, p. 5).

The Strait of Malacca has always been a strategic corridor for global shipping, as it is an important economic and commercial transit area, acting as a shortened water outlet for the sea routes linking the energy-exporting countries of the Gulf with the countries of East and South East Asia, particularly China, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea, through which approximately 13.6 million barrels per day, were transported according to 2009 statistics (Aloue, 2012).

On the other hand, this strait is a geographical link to the South China Sea, a geostrategic maritime area that connects the maritime region of the Middle East with the Indian subcontinent in Northeast Asia. In addition, about 40% of global trade, and 80% to 90 % of the oil imports from China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan pass through the strait (Bakir H. A., 2014, p. 5).

The economic, strategic, and geopolitical importance of the Strait of Malacca, as described above, has led Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore to emphasize on many international occasions their sole and joint right to secure the movement of cargo ships in order to ensure

the continuity of navigation in this vital area. However, as the interests of major countries (such as the United States, China, Japan, and India) are linked to this strait, we find them carrying out operational missions to protect marine tankers This is based on the premise that the task of securing the navigation of their ships through this strait is an international, not a regional, task (Bakir H. A., 2014, p. 6).

3. Dimensions of Malacca Strait international competition

3.1. Strait of Malacca's (geo-economic and geopolitical importance)

In the context of the major shift in the center of gravity of the economic, process from the West to the East (Asia) and the concomitant change in the international energy trade market (oil production and consumption). This change has doubled the pressure in the field of energy transport and marketing and increased the importance of sea routes, especially towards the East and Southeast Asian regions. This shift in the global economic center of gravity makes waterways and ports in Pacific waters, such as the Strait of Malacca, a battleground for international maritime powers due to their geopolitical importance. This is even more true for China, the world's largest oil importer and global trading factory.

Increased international competition in this vital region is aimed at controlling the sea lanes, a key objective for any country

with economic, security, and military interests in the Asia-Pacific. While China relies on the "Pearl Necklace" plan and is developing its naval forces to assert control over the region beyond the Strait of Malacca, the United States is shifting its focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. India is also focusing on strengthening its military presence near the Strait of Malacca and is seeking closer relations with Southeast Asian countries (Bakir H. A., 2014, p. 2).

In the same context, the competition between major powers for hydrocarbon resources has increased the intensity of demand for energy sources (oil and gas), including transport, marketing, and distribution. This competition in energy consumption has increased the importance of shipping, especially maritime straits as routes that shorten distances and time. According to a 2014 report by Al Jazeera Studies Center, around 62% of the oil produced in the world is transported each year by cargo ships, while the remaining 38% is transported by pipelines and trains (Bakir H. A., 2014, p. 4). Thus, transportation by sea now dominates twice as much as transportation by land or pipeline.

3.2 Growth in shipping and maritime services

The importance of maritime transport services is reflected in the growing movement of global shipping and trade.

The number of oil tankers in service is estimated at around 4042 cargo ships, of which around 396 are oil tankers with a capacity of 2 million barrels. In addition to the possibility of using these tankers as secondary tanks, about 81 million barrels of oil were stored in similar tankers in 2009 (Catherine Biaggi, 2024, p. 7).

In terms of the activity of these tankers at the global level, it can be defined as three strategic maritime routes. The first maritime route extends through the Strait of Malacca towards Southeast and East Asia. Constant movement characterizes it, given that it includes the two largest oil-importing countries (China and Japan). The second maritime route extends from the Cape of Good Hope to the United States and North and South America. Finally, the third maritime route extends from European waters to the Suez Canal (Catherine Biaggi, 2024, p. 8).

In addition to the strategic water straits through which about 35 million barrels of oil pass daily, which makes them the main pathways feeding the international economy. Such as the Bab al-Mandab, Malacca, Hormuz, Bosphorus, Suez Canal, and Panama Straits (Bakir A. H., 2010, p. 171).

The rising energy demand has made the oil trade via tankers grow exponentially. Today, oil is transported over very long distances across different continents, from West Africa and Latin America to India, China, and Japan. Competition in maritime

navigation and the ownership of cargo ships that roam the seas of the world have become the basis for continued economic growth of industrialized countries.

4. Sino-American rivalry over Malacca

4.1 Importance of the Strait of Malacca to China's energy security

China's growing demand for energy sources, demonstrates how much importance Beijing places on securing its strategically important international sea lanes. It can be said that the energy supply in the Chinese security doctrine is closely linked to the realization of its national security requirements.

As such, Beijing prioritizes the Strait of Malacca as a vital corridor of great economic value. Since the majority of its oil, supplies are imported from around the world, especially from the Middle East and Africa, all come through this strategic area. Therefore, any security disturbance in the energy transportation corridors puts China in a precarious position. Especially since all the routes used to transport cargo ships pass through three main transit points, of which the Strait of Malacca is a pivotal passage, as follows (Sevim, 2014, p. 39):

1-Africa Line: Starts from North Africa - Mediterranean Sea - Cape of Good Hope - Strait of Malacca - Taiwan Strait - China.

2- Middle East Line: Departing from the Gulf - Strait of Hormuz - Strait of Malacca - Strait of Taiwan - China.

3- Southeast Asia Line: Malacca Strait - Taiwan Strait – China.

In the same context, it is worth noting that for a long period, controlling and securing major sea lanes has been America's prerogative. This put China in the dilemma of securing its maritime routes, especially securing the navigation of its ships in the Strait of Malacca because two-thirds of its foreign trade passes through it. Whether for imports (oil 80%, gas 22%, iron 21%). In addition, exports continue to increase. Against this background, former president Hu Jintao, in a speech on November 29, 2003, described the Strait of Malacca as a security dilemma for China (Laurent, 2010, p. 250), because it is centrally dependent on this strait, which is under the sovereignty of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. This makes it extremely vulnerable to any possible naval blockade by the United States as a global power that threatens China and has wide influence in the East and Southeast Asian regions.

4.2 Addressing China's strategic vulnerabilities

Beijing's concern about its energy security rests on three main pillars: (Dependency, strategic vulnerability, and the US threat.) As a re-emerging power on

the international stage, it needs to secure its growing oil supply since 1993, imported from the Gulf region and Africa by 60 %. With its increasing economic growth, China became the world's second largest oil consumer in 2003 and the second largest oil importer in 2004, after the United States and ahead of Japan (Daojiong, 2006, p. 182).

The Strait of Malacca poses a major strategic challenge for China because it is the fastest and busiest transit point between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea and a vital trade artery in the world. One-third of world trade, including 50% of world oil, over 70% of China's economic flows, and 90% of Japan's oil pass through here. Unlike Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, China is not a traditional ally of the United States, which has historically controlled most of its sea lanes, but a major competitor. This makes China cautious and concerned about navigating strategic straits, including the Strait of Malacca (Laurent, 2010, pp. 251-252), which could threaten its own energy supplies and economic growth.

Over the past two decades, China has pursued a number of alternative strategies in an attempt to ensure the security of its oil supply. Domestically, it has worked to build up strategic reserves and diversify its energy projects such as nuclear and renewable energy. At the international level, it has negotiated with many countries

to grant it facilities in ports that fall within its vital interests, while strengthening its maritime military capacity centers by establishing military bases (Djibouti, Gwadar). In addition to diversifying its import sources (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, Nigeria, Angola, Kazakhstan, etc.), as well as launching huge infrastructure projects on an international scale such as the Belt and Road Initiative, including energy corridors (Catherine Biaggi, 2024, p. 24).

The strategic perception of Chinese leadership ranks the Strait of Malacca among its security priorities, which prompted it to modernize its naval fleet in order to increase its defense readiness to ensure the protection of its national interests. In addition to its logistical preparations that ensure the possibility of intervening on the high seas to repel the potential threat of hostile forces in the South China Sea (Matar, 2014, p. 114).

As part of this approach, China has also worked to strengthen its cooperative relations with the countries bordering the South China Sea to the Middle East, including the countries located along the coastline that supplies it with its oil supplies. Where it has adopted a proactive strategy, through which it relies on building vital facilities such as (ports, bases, radars, airports, oil refineries, logistics facilities, etc.) in Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, Myanmar, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Pakistan. This is to secure maritime

navigation areas and protect energy and commodity supply lines, especially those coming from the coasts of Somalia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Bakir A. H., 2010, p. 178).

Chinese policymakers recognize that this corridor, including overseas oil transportation routes, is a vital issue from an energy security perspective. From this perspective, China is working within its grand strategies to develop transportation routes based on multiple channels (Sevim, 2014, p. 32). This includes minimizing its association with the Strait of Malacca as it moves towards expanding its reliance on gas and oil resources coming from Russia and Central Asia as an alternative. It is also working to establish an oil pipeline through Myanmar (Burma) and Pakistan (Chen, 2009, p. 12).

4.2 American Strategic Perspective on the Strait of Malacca

The United States focuses its national interests primarily on the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca, which represents a geopolitical, economic, and security connection between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In addition, the oil sources coming from the Arabian Gulf to the United States and Western Europe all pass through this strait. Thus, this geostrategic importance pushes Washington to control navigation routes through the Indian Ocean and the East and South China Seas (Maidi, 2014, p. 125).

Therefore, the deployment of the US naval fleet in the oceans and seas represents one of the major strategies employed by Washington to extend its global influence. In particular, intensifying its military presence near sea lanes allows it to encircle naval powers and block navigation in the face of rival countries in the event of wars and conflicts. Within the framework of this approach pursued by America, we find that the Strait of Malacca, as one of the most important global maritime chokepoints, is included in the calculations of American strategic thinking. As it represents the main throat from which the economies of the Asian continent feed, and its control makes it capable of exerting pressure on rival countries, such as China (Wu, 2016).

As part of Washington's efforts to tighten its control over this vital strait, it moved the headquarters of the Seventh Fleet to the Changi Yee naval base in Singapore in 1992. This gives it an advantage in consolidating its control over important maritime spaces in Southeast Asia. Among the most important US military bases in this region are Anderson Air Force Base, Apra Naval Base, and Agana Naval Air Station. These bases enable it to station its military forces and take off and land long-range B-2 and B-52 strategic bombers. Especially the island of Guam, which represents the military barrier in the center of the Pacific Ocean. The U.S. Seventh Fleet in the Pacific attaches fundamental importance to the strategic

Pacific island of Guam as a forward military center (Bakir H. A., 2014, p. 6).

Beginning in November 2011, the US administration worked to reorganize its military balance from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region. This is why it worked to move its military weight to this region with the aim of besieging Chinese and Russian expansion (Clinton, 2011).

To implement this plan, the Pentagon began redistributing its military forces in Northeast Asia by reducing their presence in the territories of Japan and South Korea and directing them to Southeast Asia to influence the region and control the sensitive maritime entrances to the Strait of Malacca. In the same direction, Washington has worked to woo the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia by establishing military cooperation relations with the aim of granting them military bases or concluding joint defense and security agreements. The latter has also turned to Australia to establish permanent military and naval bases, as it is a traditional ally, which will give Washington greater influence in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean (Bakir H. A., 2014, p. 7).

According to a 2016 report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, China's exports through the Strait of Malacca are valued at \$874 billion, compared to \$83 billion for the United States, with another high percentage of

exports through the Strait, including \$249 billion to South Korea, \$141 billion to Japan, and \$117 billion to Germany. Based on these huge financial values, it can be said that the conflict between the United States and China over control of the Strait is primarily geopolitical and economic (Greco, 2022) .

From the above, the Strait of Malacca is the first advanced point of engagement in the escalating strategic rivalry between China on the one hand, and the United States and its allies in East and Southeast Asia on the other. The Strait is of great importance to Washington as a vital artery through which oil imports pass to its allies (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) or its rivals (China, Russia, and North Korea).

4. CONCLUSION

The study concluded with a set of findings based on which the problematic variables associated with interpreting the geopolitical dimension of the Strait of Malacca were analyzed. This is in the context of the Sino-American competition over this important maritime outlet, especially the economic, geopolitical, and security dimensions. In addition to the strategic importance of this strait, which is included in the priorities of the national security requirements of both China and the United States.

The Strait of Malacca constitutes a geopolitical, economic and security

dimension of paramount importance in maritime navigation as it is the vital artery for the economies of the Pacific countries. Especially when it comes to energy supplies from production sources to East Asian countries, especially China and Japan. Alternatively, even in terms of global trade. Control of strategic shipping lanes is also an important factor in the process of building threat perceptions for East and Southeast Asian countries because they still rely heavily on maritime transportation for energy resources.

Beijing's concern about its energy security rests on three main pillars: (dependency, strategic vulnerability, and the US threat). Therefore, the future of its energy security and the maintenance of its economic growth depends heavily on ensuring the security of sea lanes, especially in the Strait of Malacca, which is considered the geopolitical heart of energy. The Strait of Malacca is the geopolitical heart of energy. Any threat to maritime navigation in this corridor would destabilize security in the East and Southeast Asia region, which would have a negative impact on this region's security and economy.

The United States seeks to maintain its military influence in the Pacific region and is the main provider of maritime security, leaving China vulnerable to a potential naval blockade.

From this point of view, we find that the United States naval military presence in the oceans and seas represents one of the major strategies adopted by Washington to extend its global influence. Especially the intensification of its military presence near the Strait of Malacca, which allows it to besiege naval forces and close navigation to rival countries in the event of security conflicts.

As part of this trend, Washington categorizes this vital strait as one of the most important global maritime choke points, because it represents the main throat that supplies the economies of the Asian continent with energy, especially its traditional allies (Japan and South Korea). Security control over the Strait of Malacca makes it capable of influencing and pressuring rival countries such as China.

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