



**Center for Global & Strategic Studies
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Maritime Silk Road and the Geo Strategic Significance of the Strait of Malacca

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Oceanic channels seem to divide us, but in fact they connect us. Since earlytimes, oceans have carried people, cultures, religions and trading goods from one end of the world to the other. On gigantic, massive ships the fleet followed a trade route that has come to be known as Maritime silk route. It laid the groundwork for a world shaped and

bound together by trade where people of vastly diverse cultures, languages and beliefs, find common ground in mutual self-interest.

Maritime Silk Road is the maritime adjunction of the Ancient Silk Road. It is a linkage between China, Southeast Asia, Indonesian islands, South Asia, the Gulf, stretching all the way to Europe. Maritime trade route comprises extensive seas and oceans, including the South China Sea, Strait of Malacca, Indian Ocean, Gulf of Bengal, Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. It is the maritime complement to the Silk Road Economic Belt, which focuses on infrastructure development, trade enhancement and economic growth, not only across Asia but beyond as well. One Belt One Road initiative is a strategic framework that offers the creation of efficient and connected trade and economic zones linking countries beyond continents.

The maritime trade route originates from the historic Southeast Asian maritime trade, Spice trade, Indian Ocean trade and the Arabian naval trade setup. The network also extends to the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea. The Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative is a mega project that ensures long-term international economic cooperation initiated by China in the year 2013, involving 65 countries and representing one-third of the world's economy. The massive plan entails trade connectivity and economic cooperation. BRI aims to boost trade facilitation and logistics growth witnessing a new era of development and modernization in the present world.

Strait of Malacca has been one of the world's busiest stretch of water with a chequered history that shows the evolution of maritime trade and development throughout history. In the international arena, a strong emphasis has always been placed on the Western sea routes in terms of economic and geostrategic perspective, overlooking the significance of other important trading routes like the Strait of Malacca. It is one of the most important shipping lanes in the world in the 21st Century. Since ages, the Malacca's strait has been the key shipping channel between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. It was under the jurisdiction of major regional powers during different historical periods.

Malacca strait:

"He who is lord of Malacca has his hand on the throat of Venice" , Portuguese writer, Duarte Barbosa.

The Strait of Malacca is the quickest route from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean. It runs through the Indonesian island of Sumatra to the west and southern Thailand to the east and has an area of about 25,000 square miles (65,000 square km). The strait is 500 miles (800 km) long and has a width of only 40 miles (65 km) in the south that broadens northward to some 155 miles (250 km)¹. Throughout centuries, trade goods have carried through this passage. Different people, faiths and cultures from vast regions of the world met and traded here. It was set up by Malay Prince trying

¹<https://www.britannica.com/place/Strait-of-Malacca>

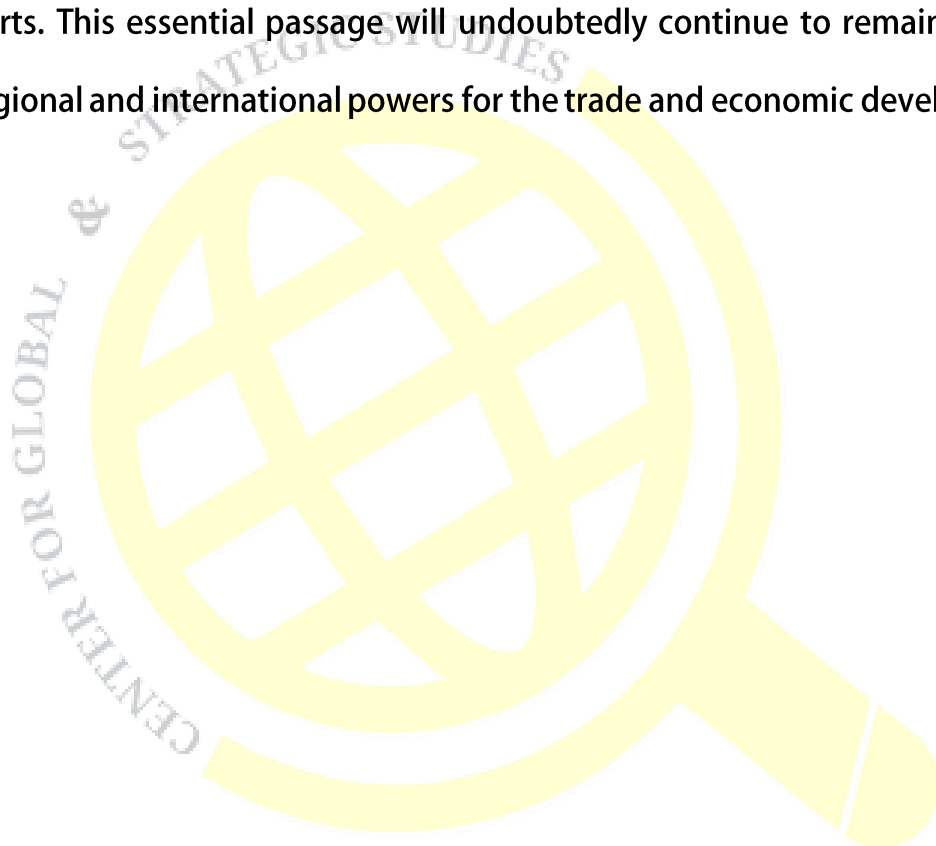
to manage his relationship with powerful rivals. He wanted to build a port in the center of straits where everyone could trade. During the 7th century the maritime kingdom of SriVijaya based on Palembang, Sumatra, came to power, expanding its influence to Java and the Malay Peninsula. It took control of two key strategic choke points in South East Asia; the Strait of Malacca and the Sunda Strait. By the end of the 14th century, Muslim merchants had grown influential in the region and adopting their religion allowed the city to attract more trade and flourish. Muslims and Hindus from all over Asia lived together in Malacca's kampongs. The importance of the Strait of Malacca in global trade networks continued with the rise of the Malacca Sultanate in the 15th century, the Johor Sultanate, and the rise of the modern city-state of Singapore. Since the 17th century, the strait has been the major shipping passage between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Various regional powers managed the strait during their specific historical periods. The Sultanate flourished on entrepot trade. The Strait of Malacca thrived in the spice trade, serving as a doorway between the Spice Islands and high demanding Eurasian markets.

Today's world has been unified by trade and economic cooperation, interconnecting people in unimaginable ways. Goods are constantly being made, moved, imported and exported. China is a country, which is both product of and driver of international trade. Presently, in raw terms, passage through the Straits of Malacca amounts to around 80% of China's oil imports, meaning that some 40% of general consumption.² It also serves

²<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/09/07/the-importance-of-the-straits-of-malacca/>

as the main transit route delivering major commodities to the emerging economies of Asia and beyond. According to the report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development Review of Maritime Transport 2011, about half of the world's total annual maritime trade goods passed through the Strait of Malacca.³

Strait of Malacca serves as a natural choke point, being one of the world's busiest trading ports. This essential passage will undoubtedly continue to remain the main focus of regional and international powers for the trade and economic development in future.



³<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2014/05/world-most-important-trade-route/>