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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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No. 141/2012 dated 1 August 2012

## **The Cross-Strait Traffic in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore: An Impediment to Safe Navigation?**

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### **Synopsis**

*The cross-strait trade activities taking place along the Straits of Malacca and Singapore have encouraged the growth of a number of coastal ports visited mainly by barter boats and vessels criss-crossing the Straits. This cross-strait traffic poses a hazard to safe navigation in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore.*

### **Commentary**

Despite the separation of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula when Indonesia and Malaysia gained independence in the 20th century, trade activities are still taking place between various ports located along the length of the Strait of Malacca as well as the Strait of Singapore.

The cross-strait or coastal shipping in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore has been a controversial issue that has been discussed in various fora of the Tripartite Technical Experts Group (TTEG) of safety of navigation for the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. Cross-strait traffic may pose hazards to the smooth and safe navigation of vessels transiting the Straits. As most cross-strait ships are vessels of less than 300 Gross Registered Tonnage (GRT), it is not compulsory for these ships to follow the safety navigation rules enforced in these waterways.

Cross-strait traffic in the Strait of Malacca includes barter trade vessels, fishing boats and passenger ferries. A tightly-knit network of trade relations, both formal and informal, spans the waterway. Barter trade activities in the Strait refer to the trade activities between the people who are living on opposite shores of the Strait of Malacca. Most of this cross-strait vessels call at the Malaysian ports of Port Dickson, Malacca, Muar and Kukup, all located at the south-western end of the Malay Peninsula. These ports have connections with various Indonesian ports on the opposite shore, including Pelabuhan Belawan, Tanjung Balai, Dumai and Bengkalis in Sumatra.

Ferries and barter trade vessels also criss-cross the Strait of Singapore, connecting Indonesian ports of Batam and Tanjung Pinang to coastal ports of Tanah Merah and Pasir Panjang in Singapore as well as the ports of Tanjung Pengelih and Stulang Laut in Malaysia. It has been reported that the regional cross-strait traffic in the Strait of Malacca is decreasing while barter traffic in the Strait of Malacca has decreased from 25, 000 vessels in 2004 to 10, 000 in 2009.

Even though the barter traffic density in the Strait of Malacca has decreased, the volume of transiting traffic has

been on the rise; from 62- 621 transits in 2005 to 74- 133 transits in 2010. Based on the growing demand for oil by the East Asian nations from their Middle Eastern counterparts, the transiting traffic in the Strait of Malacca are predicted to increase by 9% each year. Therefore, the safety of transiting ships in the Strait of Malacca could be compromised by the existence of cross-strait traffic, as most of the cross-strait traffic routes overlap with the Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS) in both the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. High risk areas include Undan Zone, Segenting Zone and Piai Zone, all of which are located at the southern portion of the Strait of Malacca which is busy with cross-strait traffic.

To date, there have never been any rules established in regulating cross-strait traffic, which is exempted from the Straits of Malacca and Singapore's mandatory ship reporting system, the STRAITREP rule. In addition, the littoral States of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia have yet to establish a proper cross-strait traffic route within the Straits of Malacca and Singapore as this designation may interfere with the flow of international shipping transiting the Straits. Hence to avoid future accidents, it would assist if the three littoral States of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia could devise solutions to this problem by designating proper lanes for cross-strait traffic in these busy waterways. A proper designation of traffic lanes (TSS for cross-strait traffic) could be established, at least at the initial stage, in the Malaysian and Indonesian sides of the Strait of Malacca, to reduce the risk of accidents in this important shipping lane.

In enhancing cross-strait traffic safety of navigation, proposals have been put forward to improve communications between barter boats and transiting vessels. This could be realised by equipping vessels with Automatic Identification System (AIS) type-B transponders which would allow them to be tracked by the Vessel Traffic Management System. Suggestions have also been mooted to enhance the sea-worthiness of cross-strait vessels and one of the ways is through the imposition of compulsory insurance for cross-strait boats. Indeed these proposed improvements are essential to assist the littoral States to enhance safety of navigation of vessels plying the Straits of Malacca and Singapore.

## **Conclusion**

Even though there has never been a major maritime disaster involving a collision between cross-strait traffic and transiting traffic, cross-strait traffic is a hazard that must be considered in improving safety for the navigation of vessels transiting the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. Should a maritime collision take place in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, the effect would be catastrophic both to the economies of the littoral States as well as the well-being of the marine environment of these waterways. It is therefore crucial for the littoral States to come out with viable ways to accommodate safe shipping for both transiting and cross-strait traffic in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore.

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