The Importance of the Straits of Malacca

The growth of the Chinese economy has been accompanied by a commensurate rise in a dependence upon offshore resources. The United States is certainly dependent upon oil from zones of international tension. However, in the case of China, this dependence is far more pronounced. The United States sources over 50% of its oil imports from the western hemisphere whereas China is far more dependent upon reserves from places like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Angola. At this point, China's energy dependence upon oil from the Middle-East is roughly comparable to the maximum figure reached by the United States.

The Chinese trend in energy dependence in oil is repeated if one widens the scope to include other sources of energy. For example, in the case of natural gas China is a relatively large producer of energy but in recent years an imports have exceeded the level of production. In the case of Coal, China is a major producer and has through great efforts, managed to remain a net exporter, but only by a very narrow margin. This shows a clear overall trend of increasing energy dependence.

These sources of energy dependence create a dilemma for Chinese policy makers. Raising the question, 'what should they do to create energy security for themselves?' The issue of where to source the energy from is of course the most obvious one. However, let us put this aside for now and look at the security problems of ensuring that these resources continue to flow into China.

If we once again focus upon oil, the vast majority of China's oil imports pass through the Straits of Malacca, Lombok and Sunda. This creates a security issue for China as the Straits function as a strategic 'chokepoint' through which China's energy supply must pass. Essentially, whoever controls the Straits of Malacca has the ability to heavily disrupt a vital energy corridor to China. The government of China is no doubt acutely aware of its energy dependence and the vulnerability of this supply.

Even if China were able to diversify the direct method of supply any major power with the ability to deny or frustrate Chinese access to the general area would be able to impact China's energy security in ways that Beijing is no doubt uncomfortable with. 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.

It is important to recognise that for the most part this concern is abstract. It would take a large international incident for a major power to consider blocking this energy transit line to China. However, it is in this area that China's security strategy comes under its highest pressure.

The development of the Chinese military has focused on the ability of their forces to engage in anti-access or area-denial capability. The basic outline of an anti-access area denial strategy is that while a state cannot defeat the United States in a conventional conflict, it can invest in cheaper alternatives that restrict the ability of the United States to deploy it's advantages. The United States has developed method of thinking about how to counter this sort of strategy through the development of its 'Air-Sea Battle' doctrine. That is, the matching of a particular capability to a specific need in such a way as to maximise the outcome and minimise the risk.

In a theoretical conflict in the South China Sea, the Chinese could seek to deny access to the United States, thus

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keeping their military outside of the conflict zone. The proximity this sea to the Chinese mainland means that its area denial capabilities are at their strongest in this area. The United States no doubt has access strategies but a state seeking to check an action in this region has other options. China is not the only power capable of using an anti-access, area-denial strategy. China itself is vulnerable to this sort of a doctrine. As we have previously discussed, a state could deny China it's strategically vital resources by blocking the Strait of Malacca or interrupting this supply at some point along the transport route.

While this sort of conflict only exists as an abstract, it is a point of concern for any Chinese thinkers attempting to develop security. The Chinese thinker Zeng Fenggang has postulated that India will seek to develop a capability to guard the straits of Malacca in peacetime and blockade it during wartime. Even if this is not the case, it shows that China and Indian planners are no doubt working in the same strategic space. It is entirely possible that India would not be comfortable with a major Chinese capability located in the area to protect its trade route. Meaning that any Chinese attempts to alleviate its energy security dilemma will occur in the strategic vicinity of India. Therefor, China faces a prospect of risking a decline one security relationship if it attempts to act on another.

Thus the security situation in the region is highly complicated and must continue to be studied and managed. Appreciating the strategic importance of the Straits of Malacca, China's energy dependence and the complex nature of the situation is no doubt important fodder for students of International Security.

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Robert Potter is a Visiting Scholar at Columbia University. His research interests include international security theory, Australian foreign policy, international norms, managing relationships in a changing security environment and human rights. Potter has been investigating how international security theory can be developed for specific use by middle powers. He is presently studying how security theory can be applied to the changing Asia-Pacific security environment.