



Soft Blockades and Strategic Control of Maritime Chokepoints in Southeast Asia

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1. Strategic Importance and Governance of Maritime Chokepoints

The literature on strategic straits generally argues that the evolution of maritime security in the post-Cold War era has made the management of chokepoints increasingly complex. However, these challenges are not entirely new. Navigation through narrow waterways has been both vital and contested for centuries, and since the early advent of sailing vessels, the passage of ships through strategic straits has been shaped by interactions among the sovereign states bordering these waterways.¹

Access to maritime routes has long been regarded as a core security priority for maritime states dependent on distant operations. In particular, the maintenance of uninterrupted energy supply routes remains a critical concern for maritime powers.² The Turkish Straits, comprising the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, illustrate this strategic importance. These straits serve as major energy transit routes and are governed by complex historical, political, and legal arrangements rooted in Turkish sovereignty and jurisdiction.³ Persistent tensions exist between Turkey and both coastal and non-coastal states due to the straits' position linking the Mediterranean and Black Seas, as well as Europe and Asia.

Navigation through international straits also presents significant governance challenges for both coastal and user states, particularly in relation to the transit passage regime under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁴ These challenges are evident in other globally significant chokepoints, such as the Straits of Hormuz. Nearly one-third of global oil and petroleum products transit this strait daily, supplying Gulf producers and major Asian economies, including Japan, China, and India.⁵

Comparable governance challenges arise in Southeast Asia. The Straits of Malacca record approximately 95,000 vessel transits annually, reflecting the rapid growth of international trade and shipping. Meanwhile, the South China Sea remains a focal point of strategic rivalry, particularly between the United States and China. Increasing geopolitical interest, alongside intensified military and law enforcement operations in recent years, has further complicated the security and governance of regional maritime chokepoints. Together, these global and regional examples demonstrate that while maritime chokepoints differ in geography and political context, they share common challenges related to sovereignty, access, and security. These challenges shape how control over these waterways may be asserted or contested.

¹ Wainwright, R. A. (1986). *Journal of International Law*, p. 366.

² Emmerson, C., & Stevens, P. (2012). *Energy and Security Analysis*, p. 2.

³ Biresselioglu, M. E., et al. (2014). *Turkish Straits Governance*, p. 227.

⁴ Dyke, J. M. (2009). *Transit Passage Through International Straits*, p. 178.

⁵ Goldenberg, I., Schwed, J., & Thomas, K. (2019). *Straits of Hormuz Strategic Assessment*, p. 15.

2. Military and Soft Blockades as Instruments of Maritime Control

Against this strategic backdrop, one of the most direct methods by which states have historically sought to control access to maritime chokepoints is through the use of military blockades. A military blockade is among the oldest and most powerful instruments of maritime strategy, traditionally aimed at denying an adversary access to trade, resources, and strategic routes. A blockade is defined as a belligerent operation intended to prevent vessels of all states from entering or leaving specified coastal areas under the sovereignty, occupation, or control of an enemy.⁶ More broadly, it involves the deliberate use of naval forces to restrict maritime access during armed conflict.

Under international law, blockaded areas may include ports, harbours, entire coastlines, or specific segments thereof.⁷ Military blockades are subject to strict legal requirements, including formal declaration, effectiveness, and impartial enforcement. They are distinct from embargoes or sanctions, which rely primarily on economic and administrative measures rather than direct naval enforcement.

Historically, blockades have functioned as tools of warfare and deterrence. In the twenty-first century, however, their application has evolved. As global economies have become increasingly interconnected through maritime trade, traditional naval blockades have become less feasible due to their high escalation risks and legal constraints. While military blockades remain a recognised instrument under international law, their declining practicality has encouraged states to explore alternative means of restricting maritime access.⁸

As traditional naval blockades have become more costly and politically sensitive, states have increasingly turned to indirect measures that restrict maritime access without crossing the threshold of armed conflict. In contrast to military blockades, a soft blockade is not formally recognised under international law. The term generally refers to indirect or undeclared restrictions on maritime access implemented through legal, economic, or regulatory mechanisms rather than overt naval force. Such measures may include port-state controls, administrative delays, selective inspections, or heightened enforcement actions justified under domestic or international regulations.⁹

Unlike traditional blockades, soft blockades operate within the grey zone between peace and armed conflict. They enable states to exert coercive pressure without openly violating international law. These practices are commonly associated with grey-zone maritime operations, in which states rely on coast guards, maritime law enforcement agencies, and civilian or paramilitary actors to advance strategic objectives while avoiding escalation to conventional warfare.¹⁰ Although often framed as routine regulatory or enforcement activities, the cumulative impact of these measures can be strategically significant, particularly in contested or congested maritime environments.

⁶ Guilfoyle, D. (2009). *Shipping Interdiction and the Law of the Sea*, pp. 1–12.

⁷ Heinegg, W. H. et al. (2025). *Newport Manual on the Law of Naval Warfare*, p. 131.

⁸ Cauble, S. (2021). *A Brief Guide to Maritime Strategy*, pp. 1–18.

⁹ Goldrick, J. (2018). *Grey Zone Operations and the Maritime Domain*, pp. 1–28.

¹⁰ Erickson, A., Hickey, J., & Holst, H. (2019). *Surging Second Sea Force*, pp. 45–72.

3. Risks and Consequences of Maritime Chokepoint Disruptions

The increasing reliance on soft and grey-zone measures has heightened concerns about the vulnerability of key maritime chokepoints, especially in regions where overlapping claims and security competition persist. In Southeast Asia, where maritime boundaries overlap and resources are contested, soft blockades have become increasingly prevalent as states seek to balance the assertion of sovereignty with the need to preserve peace, economic stability, and maritime development.

The Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea face a range of transboundary threats, including piracy and armed robbery, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, smuggling of people and goods, and so-called dark fleet operations. These activities often involve vessels evading safety and environmental regulations, avoiding insurance requirements, or conducting illicit operations such as unauthorised ship-to-ship oil transfers at sea.¹¹ Such threats pose significant governance challenges for both littoral and user states, undermining confidence in the security and reliability of strategic maritime chokepoints. These risks manifest through a combination of operational, legal, and strategic dynamics, as outlined below.

3.1 Expansion of Grey-Zone Tactics at Sea

In the South China Sea, claimant states continue to manage overlapping maritime claims amid growing complexity and sensitivity in law enforcement operations. Maritime law enforcement agencies increasingly operate at the intersection of security, sovereignty, and resource protection. This dynamic is further complicated by the blurred distinction between civilian law enforcement and military activity, as coast guard vessels are often heavily armed and supported by naval assets.

These developments have contributed to the expansion of grey-zone tactics at sea, whereby non-military actors, such as fishing militias or coast guards, are used to assert territorial claims and exert pressure without provoking open conflict. While these approaches may reduce the immediate risk of escalation, they complicate maritime governance and increase uncertainty at sea. The growing use of such tactics also heightens the likelihood of unintended encounters between vessels operating under different mandates.¹²

3.2 Risks of Escalation and Operational Miscalculation

Strategic maritime areas and chokepoints are becoming increasingly congested, with coast guards, navies, and fisheries enforcement vessels operating in close proximity. This operational density significantly raises the risk of accidents, miscalculations, and unintended escalation, particularly in contested or poorly coordinated maritime spaces. Close-quarter manoeuvring, overlapping patrols,

¹¹ International Maritime Organisation (2025). *Dark Fleet Operations Overview*.

¹² Morris, L. et al. (2019). *Gray Zone Coercion Assessment*, pp. 1–130.

and ambiguous command-and-control arrangements create conditions in which routine interactions can quickly deteriorate into serious incidents.

Recent operational encounters illustrate these risks. For example, an incident reported in August 2025 involving the Chinese Coast Guard and a People's Liberation Army Navy destroyer during the pursuit of a Philippine patrol vessel highlights how law enforcement and naval operations can intersect in destabilising ways.¹³ Such encounters demonstrate the potential for tactical actions at sea to disrupt regional stability and, in extreme cases, contribute to temporary disruptions or closures of strategic maritime areas.

These risks are further compounded by the absence of effective coordination mechanisms in the South China Sea. In contrast to the Straits of Malacca and the Sulu–Celebes Seas, which benefit from cooperative frameworks such as the Malacca Straits Patrol and the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement, the South China Sea lacks a unified regional enforcement mechanism. As a result, even minor incidents, including ship collisions or navigational errors, carry the potential to escalate into broader diplomatic or military crises. Beyond isolated incidents, this pattern underscores how congestion, competition, and inadequate coordination together increase the likelihood of escalation and miscalculation in strategic chokepoints.

3.3 Hybrid Blockade Dynamics in Contested Waters

A major security concern is the potential emergence of hybrid blockade dynamics in the South China Sea. Activities such as artificial island construction, unilateral fishing bans, declarations of environmental protection zones in disputed areas, and persistent shadowing of vessels by maritime militias are widely regarded as coercive tactics. These actions enable states to gain strategic advantages below the threshold of armed conflict, reinforcing control while avoiding overt confrontation.¹⁴ Over time, such practices can effectively constrain access to maritime spaces without triggering the legal or political consequences associated with formal blockades.

¹³ Lin, YY (2025). What the China Coast Guard-PLAN Ship Collision Reveals About China's Military Capabilities, *The Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/08/what-the-china-coast-guard-plan-ship-collision-reveals-about-chinas-military-capabilities/>

¹⁴ Morris, L. et al. (2019). *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone*, pp. 1–130.

4. Malaysia's National Responses to Soft and Hybrid Blockades

In response to these evolving risks, regional states have begun to recalibrate their maritime security strategies. Southeast Asian states have adopted various measures to address soft blockade pressures, including strengthening coast guard capabilities and enhancing multilateral maritime cooperation. Malaysia's approach provides a useful illustration of how a littoral state seeks to respond to soft and hybrid blockade dynamics while maintaining stability and openness in strategic waterways.

Malaysia's geographic position exposes it to diverse non-traditional maritime threats, including piracy, illegal fishing, dark fleet operations, and foreign encroachments. These challenges could potentially evolve into coercive or soft blockade scenarios. Official defence assessments highlight concerns over the increasingly subtle use of non-military strategies in the South China Sea, including hydrographic research activities conducted under the protection of foreign coast guards within Malaysia's Exclusive Economic Zone.¹⁵

Under the 13th Malaysia Plan (2026–2030), the Malaysian government has placed renewed emphasis on military readiness and deterrence, particularly in response to sovereignty and security challenges in the South China Sea.¹⁶ Malaysia has continued to strengthen its military presence in East Malaysia in response to sustained operational pressure from the Chinese Coast Guard and illegal fishing vessels from Vietnam operating within its Exclusive Economic Zone.

In parallel, Malaysia has pursued comprehensive maritime governance measures aligned with the Blue Economy framework. These include efforts to strengthen enforcement of the Fisheries Act 1985 to curb illegal and excessive fishing activities, particularly in designated zones affected by resource depletion.¹⁷ Institutionally, Malaysia has also undertaken maritime legal reform. In July 2025, the Ministry of Transport established the Maritime Law Revision and Reform Committee as a strategic response to the growing complexity and volatility of global maritime trade.¹⁸

Malaysia continues to reinforce security in strategic waterways through established cooperative mechanisms such as the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement and the Malacca Straits Patrol, which exemplify the role of multilateral collaboration in maintaining stability while countering coercive practices.¹⁹ While these national measures are essential, their effectiveness is closely shaped by broader regional and international dynamics.

¹⁵ Khaled (2025). *Defence White Paper Review*, Malaysia.

¹⁶ Government of Malaysia (2025). *13th Malaysia Plan 2026–2030*.

¹⁷ Ministry of Fisheries Malaysia (2025). *Fisheries Enforcement Measures – Blue Economy Implementation*.

¹⁸ The Star (10 July 2025). *Maritime Law Revision and Reform Committee Established*.

¹⁹ MSP & TCA Official Reports (2025). *Regional Security Cooperation Overview*.

5. Strengthening EU–Malaysia Cooperation on Maritime Security

Given the transnational nature of maritime trade and the shared interest in maintaining open sea lines of communication, cooperation between Malaysia and external partners assumes particular significance. The maritime domain hosts strategic sea lanes that are critical not only for coastal states but also for the international community. High-impact collaboration in less politically sensitive areas, such as maintaining open and secure chokepoints, offers significant benefits, particularly for European Union member states with strong interests in global maritime commerce.²⁰

The European Union and Southeast Asian states share a commitment to upholding a rules-based international order grounded in international law and UNCLOS. EU–Malaysia collaboration can therefore focus on practical measures to strengthen maritime security while mitigating the risk of chokepoint disruptions. These include capacity building, targeted technical training for maritime law enforcement agencies, and enhanced intelligence sharing across maritime, airspace, and subsea domains relevant to offshore energy, telecommunications, and ocean engineering.

European initiatives, including Freedom of Navigation operations and capacity-building programmes conducted by individual EU member states such as France and Germany, demonstrate tangible engagement with Southeast Asian partners.²¹ Building on these efforts, Malaysia and EU countries can pursue cooperation aimed at operational readiness, legal and regulatory reform, and situational awareness in the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea.

Key areas of collaboration include port and coast guard training, live crisis rerouting exercises, and rapid reopening drills for strategic ports and chokepoints. Intelligence sharing and technical assistance can enhance early warning capabilities and coordinated responses to emerging threats. Legal and regulatory support from the EU can further assist Malaysia in strengthening maritime governance, fisheries enforcement, and Blue Economy initiatives.

Joint exercises and scenario planning focused on grey-zone operations can improve inter-agency coordination and preparedness for incidents involving environmental crises, maritime traffic disruptions, or hybrid blockade scenarios. Through these measures, Malaysia and its European partners can enhance resilience and ensure the continued security of critical maritime chokepoints.

²⁰ Cauble, S. (2021). *A Brief Guide to Maritime Strategy*, pp. 1–18.

²¹ Akram, Q., & Fareed, M. (2019). *China's "Malacca Dilemma"*, Journal of Politics and International Studies, 5(2), 29–44.

6. Conclusion

Taken together, the analysis demonstrates how evolving forms of maritime coercion intersect with national responses and international cooperation in shaping the security of strategic maritime chokepoints. The shift from traditional military blockades to soft and hybrid blockade practices highlights the increasing complexity of maritime operations in highly trafficked and contested waters. These dynamics pose significant challenges for coastal and user states alike, particularly in regions such as Southeast Asia where strategic competition, dense maritime traffic, and overlapping claims converge.

Malaysia's experience illustrates how a littoral state can respond to these challenges through a combination of national capability development, legal and institutional reform, and sustained participation in multilateral maritime cooperation. At the same time, the analysis underscores that national measures alone are insufficient to address the transnational nature of risks affecting maritime chokepoints. Effective management therefore depends on broader cooperation that reinforces operational coordination, information sharing, and adherence to international legal norms.

In this context, targeted cooperation between Malaysia and the European Union offers practical opportunities to strengthen resilience in key maritime corridors. High-impact collaboration in areas such as capacity building, intelligence cooperation, legal and regulatory support, and joint preparedness exercises can contribute to reducing the likelihood of disruption while supporting the continued openness of strategic sea lanes. While political and operational constraints remain, incremental and issue-focused engagement provides a realistic pathway for enhancing maritime security. Ultimately, sustained cooperation grounded in shared interests and rule-based principles will be essential to ensuring that Southeast Asia's maritime chokepoints remain secure, stable, and reliable in an increasingly complex maritime environment.

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