

Robyn Lim: comments at ICWAT conference, Starkville, MS, March 2006.

The fact that Australian merchant and naval vessels don't much use the Malacca Strait is true, but irrelevant. Australia's vital interest is the integrity of the Indonesian archipelago, and maritime passage through the vital straits that connect the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Australia's interest in maritime passage is not just on our own account as an island continent whose first requirement is maritime security. Maritime passage through the Strait is also a vital interest of our major ally, the United States, which is also the globally dominant maritime power. It is also a vital interest of Japan. Since the time of the Korean War (which brought the Cold War to East Asia) it has been vastly in Australia's interest, as well as that of the wider region, that the United States remain willing to provide long-range maritime (and nuclear) security for Japan.

Security in the Malacca Strait is in fact a vital interest of all the main parties in East Asia, including China. China is no longer communist, but is using capitalism in order to cement the communist party in power. Thus the policy responses of the United States, and others, must take this into account.

But when we talk about shared interests, we must also comprehend that the parties do not see their interests in exactly the same way. To me, this issue of strategic disjuncture lies at the heart of strategic analysis.

Let me give an example in relation to ANZUS. Australia fears the *lack* of US support in a time of crisis. But any country threatening Australia, or its vital interests, would have to fear the *possibility* of US support for Australia.

In relation to the Malacca Strait, if the US, Japan and Australia seem as if they want to impose their own agenda on Indonesia and Malaysia, this is bound to backfire. In the case of Indonesia, for example, throughout its modern history as an independent state, Indonesia has had reason to fear that potentially hostile great powers might exploit the weaknesses of a diverse, far flung archipelago in a most strategic location.

Currently, after many years of troubles, the inner core of ASEAN is being reknitted. I noted with interest, for example, that Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew has recently paid a visit to his old comrade General Suharto, and spent an evening playing chess with SBY. It was of course the regular "four eyes" meetings between Lee and Suharto that provided the essential glue that kept ASEAN together in its heyday.

As our Indonesian and Malaysian colleagues said yesterday, for them there are some basic issues of sovereignty involved in the Malacca Strait question. Of course, Western governments also have their constituencies at home. Admiral Fargo mentioned last night how he had been misquoted by the media after his testimony to Congress. And when meetings are held, ministers and senior bureaucrats are always looking for "deliverables". Thus because there are different audiences involved, none of this is easy.

But as far as the recommendations of this conference are concerned, no policy can possibly succeed unless Indonesia and Malaysia see it as being in their own strategic interests.