

**MARITIME HERITAGE AND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: A
HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON MALAYSIA'S JOURNEY AS A
MARITIME NATION**

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Abstract

The seas and oceans have traditionally been a source of inspiration in the search for truth, and have gone on to successfully negate the human worldview that associated it with various elements of mythos and superstition. The seas and oceans also have their advantages in that they have strengthened the relationship between countries and helped form a united spirit, mutual understanding, unity, and generate wealth. It is an invaluable, irreplaceable, and unmodifiable treasure. In the traditional narratives of the Malay World, the close tie between "sea-folk" and seas such as the South China Sea, the Sulu Sea, the Sulawesi Sea, the Flores Sea, the Java Sea, the Banda Sea, and so on which are all found within in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean is undeniable. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the changes and developments that exist in the Southeast Asian region today, i.e. from bearing the characteristics of traditional governments to becoming modern nations are anchored to the seas and oceans, and the role played by seafaring tribesmen who had the seas run in their blood. However, nowadays it seems that these services and sacrifices for thousands of years have remained only in the annals of history and have not been paid much heed to. The emergence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) doctrine introduced by China in 2013 appears to have given new hope to the seas and oceans to be elevated once again and used as an agenda for development by various countries in the region. Hence, this paper aims to discuss several terms, concepts and scopes in marine discipline; the importance of marine history teaching in the region from a historiographical perspective; the extent of how far the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) doctrine has been given serious attention by Malaysia towards becoming a maritime state; the opportunities and obstacles challenges; and some prerequisites to be taken into account in making this mission and vision for Malaysia a reality.

Keywords: Maritime Nation, Malaysia, Seas, Oceans, Belt and Road Initiative, Southeast Asian

Introduction

The traditional history of the Southeast Asian Archipelago, once known as Nusantara, has demonstrated the importance of seas and oceans in building civilisations in the region. Beginning with the Srivijaya government in the 6th century and later replaced by the Majapahit government in the 13th century, both of which were founded on Hindu-Buddhist religious tenets and closely related to the seas and oceans, these two kingdoms were able to emerge as empires characterised by thalassocracy (maritime kingdoms) that were well-respected and visited by sailors, traders, scholars, and theologians from various parts of the

world.¹ The political upheaval and development of Islam in the region, which took place around the 13th century, saw the collapse of these two kingdoms and their replacement by various governments based on a sultanate system and Islam, such as the Pasai, Demak, Perlak, Aceh, Melaka, Tidore, Ternate, Banten, Banjar, Selapang, Gowa-Tallo, Kutai, Bone, Cirebon, Mataram, Bima, Deli, Siak, and so on. Prior to the arrival of Western powers and the beginnings of colonialism and its processes, the importance of the seas and straits in the Malay Archipelago was highlighted as the basis for the glory of these kingdoms.²

However, this trend began to change as territories within the region were colonised by Western powers such as the Portuguese, Spanish, English and Dutch, who began to ignore the importance of the sea and oceans and focused more on land as the basis of their economic and political strength.³ This doctrine continued when these territories achieved independence and stood as a nation-state after the Second World War to date.⁴ Nowadays, various issues such as the economic crisis, conflicts between countries, cross-border crime, unemployment, poverty, and so on appear to have hit countries in the region as a result of this policy, and it is time for countries in the Southeast Asian Archipelago to revisit, and reposition the interests of the straits, seas and oceans that exist in the region as a developmental and unifying agenda for common prosperity. In this regard, Malaysia is also seemingly not spared from the abovementioned issues, and the time has come for the government to look back and reconsider the importance of the seas and oceans as an invaluable treasure, and as one of the main development agendas for the well-being of the country and the people of today, akin to what was achieved by the Malacca Malay Sultanate in the past.⁵

Some Maritime Terms, Concepts and Scopes

The knowledge and understanding of some of the terminology, concepts, and scopes related to maritime are important foundations to have before understanding the marine and maritime agenda and its relevance to the current BRI doctrine. A commonly raised question is what do the terms sea and ocean mean?. In simple language, the sea refers to an area of water that flows through and around land and islands.⁶ In ancient Malay, the sea was referred to as the *Tagaroa*, which arises from a combination of two words, *Taga* and *Roa*, which mean large lakes, wide wells, or wide lakes. The islanders residing in the Melanesian and Micronesian archipelago also referred to Tagaroa as *Tangaroa*, *Tanaroa*, *Ta'aroa*, *Tagalooa*, *Tangalooa*, *Tagaloang* and *Hangalooa*, which also means "god of all seas and oceans". To the ancient Malay sailors, Tagaroa referred to only one sea rather than the oceans as we know them today such as the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, the Arctic Sea, and so on. Meanwhile, the ocean which is also known as "*samudera*" in Malay and "oceans" in English refers to a very large area of water and has a variety of seas in its territory.⁷

The word ocean is derived from the Latin word *oceanus*, derived from the ancient Greek vocabulary of *okeanos* which originally referred to the seas that separate the landmass of Europe to the landmass of Africa, but excluding the Mediterranean Sea.⁸ In ancient Greek folklore, *okeanos* is considered the incarnation of the god Oceanus who descended to Earth from the planet Uranus and later married the Earth goddess Gaia.⁹ From the words, sea and ocean, a new term, "maritime" was created, which is usually used specifically in the language of legislation as well as administration such as maritime law, maritime policy, maritime nation, and so on, which is also referred to as a "supra system or parent" by Bonar

Simangunsong (2015) which covers the shipping sector, fisheries, tourism, migration, taxes, security, defence, and so on.¹⁰

In both academic and technical terms, 'maritime' can be construed as the science of all things related to affairs of the sea, from the aspect of humanity (human oceanography) which includes fishing activities, fishing technology, agriculture, legislation and so on; the aspect of physical oceanography, which includes the science of marine geology (geological oceanography), and the science of meteorology on climate and weather, chemical oceanography, and marine biology (biological oceanography).¹¹ Recently, a new branch of marine science has arisen, namely marine engineering (ocean engineering), which involves the field of ship construction, petroleum and gas, electric energy known as OTEC (Ocean Temperature Electrical Conversion), jetties, sea-wall and so on. Today, there are also several other terms related to the sea such as marine life, marine technology, marine research, marine litter, marine art, marine topography, marine coastal, marine habitat, marine coastal, maritime economy, maritime state, maritime cluster, and so on oriented towards marine science, economists, and political science.¹²

When discussing the terms sea, ocean, maritime, and marine from the perspective of marine science, the term maritime will appear as a term that can explain the meaning and scope of all the above terms. The term maritime as accepted today is derived from the English word maritime, which was derived from the Latin *myryayne*, *maritayne*, *maritime-us* and *mariten*. *Mari* or *Mare* in Greek means sea, life near the sea, or matters related to sea-voyaging.¹³ Therefore, the term maritime term may refer to the field of study that is related to human activities or activities in the past related to maritime aspects, especially voyaging and trade.¹⁴

The Wikipedia Encyclopedia refers to the term maritime as "primarily an adjective that describes objects or activities related to the sea" or an adjective to describe marine-related activities.¹⁵ In terms of its history, the term maritime is quite new and was not derived from Malay, but borrowed from the English language. For this reason, civilisations built around or based on the sea by seafarers in the Nusantara or the Malay Archipelago in the past were never referred to as maritime civilisations. They were instead referred to as Malay civilisations because the word 'Malay' was a depiction of seamen. The term 'maritime' only came into existence in the 14th century, i.e. during the Renaissance, when European nations began to shift their worldview from being land-oriented to include the seas and oceans.¹⁶

Next, what is meant by the terms "historiography" and "maritime historiography"? Generally, "historiography" means the study of all practices in history as an academic discipline, whereas the term "maritime historiography" refers to the writing of history and its methodology by making maritime historiography the main theme. Historiography is formed from two words, history, and graph, which means writing. The study of historiography will certainly guide historians to use appropriate methods in research, whether a study is problem-oriented or non-problem oriented, and write about past events chronologically and systematically, as well as become more critical and historically-minded.¹⁷ History as a discipline that has its own methodology only uses the term historiography, and will not be a term such as anthropology, sociology and so on. Today, there is a new term, 'new historiography', popularised by Shahril Talib Robert, which is used especially when re-examining historiography from the perspective of colonialism and capitalism using a multi-disciplinary approach. The use of various terminologies by scholars in conducting research and writing on the subject of maritime has also created variety in the field of history.¹⁸ Some

historians are inclined to use the terms marine history, maritime history, *bahari* history and samudera history, ancient maritime history, nautical history and so on that vary in meaning, time, space, and scope of discussion. In general, the terminology, concept and scope of maritime history can be construed as follows:

“Maritime history is the study of human interaction with and activity at sea. It covers a broad thematic element of history that often uses a global approach, although national and regional histories remain predominant. As an academic subject, it often crosses the boundaries of standard disciplines, focusing on understanding mankind’s various relationships to the oceans, seas, and major waterways of the globe... But revisionist scholars are creating new turns in the study of maritime history. This includes a post 1980s turn towards the study of human users of ships (which involves sociology, cultural geography, gender studies and narrative studies) and post 2000 turn towards seeing sea travel as part of the wider history of transport and mobilities”.¹⁹

Through this definition, the scope of maritime history appears to have been expanded again, encompassing various themes such as ancient times, the age of navigation, ships and vessels, maritime of discovery, age of discovery, European expansion, European colonisation, clipper route, end of exploration, age of sail, the Ming exploration, the Spanish and English armadas, North American maritime, the challenger expedition, end of the sail, submarines, age of steam, the rise of the steam vessels, and also includes notable individuals, treasure hunting, and archaeology and underwater management.²⁰ This means that research and writing on maritime history are no longer limited by time and space according to historical stages or chronology, but also researches and writes on current marine affairs known as "contemporary maritime history". For example, current issues involving pirates, cross-border crime, maritime demarcation legislation, overwater settlements, human migration, overlapping claims, conflicts at sea and so on seem to be gaining a place among scholars, and gives them the ability to be made the ruling Government in dealing with the country’s current issues.

Although there are various terms used, all the terms described above are still based on the sea and ocean on a scholarly basis, and the one thing that distinguishes them is from the aspect of knowledge. In conducting research and writing in relation to marine history, we are more inclined to use the term maritime as it refers directly to the seas and oceans as opposed to the term *baharí*, which also has other meanings other than seas and oceans. In addition, the term 'maritime' is also more global in nature, and crosses the maritime field of study itself after taking into account the existence of various branches of seas and oceanic history today.

we are also of the opinion that if a study and writing are completely "historical *per se*," which is limited to the space and time based on the early history of the archipelago, also known as Nusantara, Malay Archipelago or Malay World, then the term *bahari* history is more appropriate because it refers to a geopolitical concept as mentioned by A.B. Lopian (1992) during a speech where he said "*The History of Nusantara, Bahari History*".²¹ From the aspects of subject and academics, maritime history according to Bonar Simangunsong (2015) in his book entitled *Laut, Masa Depan Indonesia* (The Sea: The Future of Indonesia) is as follows:

“...maritime history, which is a study of human activity at sea. It covers thematic and general historical elements and is used as a global approach, although the main one is national and regional history. As an academic subject, maritime history often transgresses the limits of academic disciplines, focused on the understanding of various human relationships with the maritime, the seas, and the world's sea routes. Nautical history, parts of maritime history, for example, recorded and translated events concerning ships, shipping, navigation, and seafarers in the past... the history of various countries related to different fields of knowledge such as oceanography, cartography, hydrographics, sea exploration, economics and maritime trade, shipping, cruise ships, sea-side resorts, the history of light beacons, maritime themes in literature, maritime themes in art, maritime history of seafarers, ship passengers, and communities related to the sea.”²²

Taking into account the variety of these terms and scopes, historians will certainly not be able to formulate their research properly if it only prioritises the facts it finds in the form of primary and secondary resources without understanding the maritime traditions and maritime culture itself in the context of the historical diversity within the archipelago in its traditions, cultures, tribes, religions or even the wisdom of its locals. Thus, it can be concluded here that maritime tradition is one of the aspects of maritime culture, whereas maritime culture comprises aspects related to maritime such as shipping, navigation, trade, piracy, and marine knowledge. In addition to the above terms, there are also new terms such as "sea of history" and "history of the sea" introduced by A.B. Lopian (1992). Although in principle these two terms have the same meaning, when viewed from a metaphorical perspective and context, they are two different things. The sea of history is a metaphor that shows that the sea is human life, and the history of the sea concerns human activity at sea in the past.²³

To celebrate the diversity of terminology and the difference in meaning in the terminology itself, the study will only use the term maritime history after taking into consideration the latest changes in terms of the scope of maritime studies itself. We are also of the view that the term maritime is broader in meaning than the term bahari, marine or ocean because besides discussing the physical marine elements, it also discusses matters related to man's relationship with the sea which includes the worldview, how society uses the sea as the basis of civilisation involving culture, trade, adventure, new settlements, wars, ports, governments, and so on. In addition, the use of the term maritime history is also very appropriate in the latest context of Southeast Asia, which is beginning to change by making the seas and oceans the main agenda of each country.

By the end of the 20th century, the scope of maritime history had been expanded by including maritime archaeology and underwater archaeology as new branches of maritime history. Generally, there is a difference in these two disciplines, where maritime archaeology refers to research on human interaction with the seas, lakes, and rivers that includes material manifestations, maritime culture, water transport (vessels), ports, warehouses, shipyards, lighthouses, buoy lights, sea embankments, and cargo including human remains in tangible and intangible forms. Meanwhile, underwater archaeology also refers to past research related to cultural sites on the seabed, lakes and rivers (submerged remains), especially shipwrecks and the good carried such as ceramics, glass, currency, metal goods, and so on. The term 'maritime' also cannot in any way be separated from the person.²⁴

Today there is also slight confusion regarding the term "seaman". In general, today's society has identified or classified all people whose life is sea-based as sea people, sea nomads, seafarers, and sea-gypsies. In fact, the term seaman refers to a special name of a tribe of sailors who lived in boats and wandered the Straits of Melaka, Riau and Johor which is thought to have existed since the days of Srivijaya. During the era of Srivijaya, Majapahit, Melaka, Johor-Riau, although they did not yet know what a king, sultan, or government was, these sea people who lived without a master played a fairly significant role in determining the success of the abovementioned maritime kingdoms as warriors and guardians of the sea.²⁵ In return, they were granted permission to reside in the kingdom and receive protection from its ruler.

For other sailors whose lives also matched the tribes of sea people in the Straits of Malacca, Riau, and Johor, and other areas such as Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, and Banda, they were not referred to as sea people but as Bajo, Mandar, Buton, Bugis, Sangir, Talaud, and Tobello. In the south of the Philippines, they were known as Bajau, Tausug, Illanon, Balangingi and so on, namely based on the name of their residence or origin (i.e. name of the island) or the title they give. For example, Bajau sailors did not identify as or call themselves Bajau, but had more detailed titles such as Sama, Sammah, Samal, or Samal at Sea, and called the Bajau and others who lived on the land as "Bagai people".²⁶ Based on the dynamics in the terminology of the seafaring tribes in this archipelago, I suggest it is time to no longer identify or classify all those whose lives were spent roaming the sea as sea people, but to call them "men of the sea" or "seamen" only. Meanwhile, A.B. Lopian (2009) also classified the tribes of sailors involved in the sea world of Indonesia into three groups: sea people, pirates, buccaneers, and sea kings.²⁷

In terms of worldview, diversity/variation/pattern is also evident in viewing the seas and oceans in the history of human civilisation. In summary, this diversity of perspective can be divided into two; one that views the sea as the source and inspiration of life, and another that views it as a life challenge in the form of separation, barrier, fear, and so on. Seamen, sailors, merchants, and rulers across the Middle East, India, China and the archipelago seemed to have long viewed the seas and oceans as a source and inspiration for success. Hence, since the beginning of the century AD, seamen, sailors, traders, and rulers in the archipelago have sailed and controlled not only the surrounding seas but also the world's, reaching many far-flung corners of the world to successfully become a mighty and respected race. This way of thinking about and viewing the sea differs significantly from that of medieval Europeans and during the Middle-ages, who were constrained by orthodox thinking (religiosity over intellect) to the point of limiting their voyages. Long before that, various descriptions had been thrown at the seas and oceans such as that they were very dangerous areas, shadowed by death because it was still assumed that the earth was flat, was filled with dangerous monsters, and so on.²⁸

It may be said that the Europeans' awareness of dominating the world's open seas to achieve success was only realised when two maritime powers from Europe, Portugal and Spain, broke the tradition in the late 16th century through the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1498 that divided the oceans to Portugal's east, which belonged to Portugal, and the seas to the west, which belonged to Spain. Through the concept of *mare-clausum* (closed seas) and later *mare-liberum* (free seas) which supported the doctrines of monopoly, capitalism, and imperialism, ultimately managed to bring down the "marine spirit" that saw the seas and

oceans as a source of inspiration that had long been fought for by seamen, sailors, merchants, and previous rulers.²⁹ In summary, it can be said that research and writing on maritime history is a wide field without boundaries, which is explained by S.K. Wahyono (2009) as follows:

"The sea cannot be fenced off, let alone occupied all year round. Even the mass of water continues to move, flowing around the earth, so there can be no part of the mass of water that can be claimed to belong to one particular country. Because at the time the announcement was made, the claimed mass of water had already moved far away from that place. Similarly, as with the fish in the water, they are free to move from one place to another, even laying eggs and hatching in one place and growing in another."³⁰

After understanding the concept and scope of maritime historiography, what then is meant by the term Nusantara? The word Nusantara first appeared in the annals of this region's history during the era of the Majapahit kingdom (1293-1478) in Java under the reign of Hayam Wuruk and Patih Gajah Mada (Prime Minister). Nusantara comes from the Javanese words "Nusa" (island) and "Antero" (other, as a whole) created by Patih Gajah Mada to strengthen the centre of the Majapahit kingdom in Java and its grip on its empire and conquered territory consisting of three political fundamental units, namely the grand state (surrounding countries) and the Nusantara (areas that do not resonate with Javanese culture, but were sometimes still claimed as colonies where they had to pay tribute).³¹ During his installation as the prime minister, Gajah Mada had performed an oath known as the Amukti Palapa Oath recorded in the tome, Pararaton Djoko Pramono (2005) as follows:

"Sira Gajah Mada pepatih amungkubumi tan ayun amukti palapa, sira Gajah Mada: Lamun huwus kalah Nusantara ing sun amukti palapa, lamun kalah ring Guron, ring Seram, Tanjungpura, ring Haru, ring Pahang, Dompo, ring Bali, Sunda, Palembang, Tumasik, samana ing sun amukti palapa" (Translation: Gajah Mada Sang Maha patih will not enjoy palapa, said Gajah Mada "As long as I have not unified Nusantara, I will not enjoy palapa. Before I have conquered Desert Island, Seram Island, Tanjungpura, Haru Island, Pahang Island, Dompo, Bali Island, Sunda Palembang, Tumasik, I will not taste palapa).³²

In the oath, Patih Gajah Mada swore by saying "*laman huwus kalah nusantara, isun amukti palapa*," which means "If I have lost the islands across the water, then I shall enjoy rest". He also vowed not to touch or eat palapa or spices until he had succeeded in uniting the areas he referred to as the Nusantara under Majapahit rule. As is well-known, the Nusantara before the beginning of the century AD until the end of the 16th century, or more precisely before it was colonised by Western powers has had a long historical journey, has a large enough territory, received various influences from world civilization and the diversity of its population so as to create various hypotheses and theories about its historical origin and civilization. This is because of its strategic location, which is located between the two main continents of the world, namely Asia and Australia and the two main oceans of the world, namely the Indian Ocean to the west and south and the Pacific Ocean to the east and north.

As a result of its diversity in its historical journey, its geopolitical breadth and lack of historical records have made the maritime historiography of the archipelago more dynamic, unique, and challenging to study.³³

Taking into account that these seas and oceans have existed over the last millions of years, viewing the seas and oceans as a terrible world and the limitations of notes and records about them, it is not an easy task to dismantle their history. Against the backdrop of the geographical fact that around 70% of the earth's area consists of water, mainly seas and oceans, the events and lives of the creatures in it are full of mystery, a world so overshadowed by myths and superstitions that it has caused mankind to be slow in exploring and travelling the marine world as opposed to the mainland world.

It can be said that the awareness of scholars regarding the importance of understanding and mastering marine-related knowledge arose when the role and contribution of the sea were realised, and the oceans' contribution to the agenda of building the world's civilisations. Starting with the knowledge and technology of shipping that was relatively limited, but gave off a sense of high spirits and courage, the prehistoric sailors (pre-script) began to successfully approach and utilise the sea and islands that were near the scope of their lives.

At the end of the pre-historic era, the emergence of historical epochs marked by various early governments showed the zeal of governments, sailors, and traders to not only rule the seas around them, but also the high seas marked by the persistence and courage of Arab, Persian, Indian, Funan, Chinese, and Nusantara sailors in sailing the world's various seas and oceans for migrating and trading, which eventually emerged into the major powers of the maritime world. The history of their success eventually opened the minds of European sailors and merchants to view the seas and the oceans as an important agenda for the formation of a nation-state. It is, therefore, no wonder why from the 6th to the 19th centuries, the world's major seas and seas were dotted with various boats and ships not only for the benefit of trade but also for the expansion of empires.³⁴

The Marine Historiography of Southeast Asia at a Glance

From an academic point of view, the interest in examining and writing on marine matters among scholars from various academic disciplines began to manifest with the realisation that there was an imbalance in proportion to land-oriented research and writing. Furthermore, there was a gap in academic resources on maritime knowledge and the role and contribution of everything maritime in the formation of the world's civilisations. This gap was somewhat filled when Alfred Thayer Mahan (1890) posited his *Theory of Sea Power and Sea Naval* through his book entitled *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783*. Discussions regarding the scope of maritime history will not be complete without discussing its resources. It is acknowledged that primary sources in the form of writings kept among human sailors relating to their maritime history are difficult to find due to the culture of writing that had not yet spread among human sailors, and depended more on archeological sources, cave paintings, stories passed down orally, and the writings of foreign seamen, sailors, and traders.³⁵ According to A.B. Lapian (1979):

“For every historical (maritime) study, the question of source is a basic problem. In the previous section, several works about the Sulawesi Sea area were mentioned that can act as a primary as well as a secondary source. It is a fact that this source is mostly foreign, because—as is the case with many tribes in southeast Asia—the tradition of writing among the local population had not been ingrained in their culture, so written sources of past events were scarce.”³⁶

Much of the maritime historiography in the archipelago relies heavily on the research and writing of foreign historians in the form of books, monographs, encyclopedias, and journals including the sponsorship of various world-class conferences. Today, there are several world-leading bodies or institutions active in publishing many academic works related to maritime aspects such as the International Journal of Maritime History (IJMH), the National Maritime Historical Society, the Oxford Encyclopedia of Maritime History and so on. In the field of publication, various academic papers have been published on matters of world maritime history. These include the following books: *1421 The Year China Discovered the World* by Gavin Menzies³⁷; *British Sea Power* by David Howarth³⁸; *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans* by David Abulafia³⁹; *In the Heart of the Sea: The tragedy of the whaleship Essex* by Nathaniel Philbrick⁴⁰; *Shadow of the Titanic: The Extraordinary Stories of Those who Survived* by Andrew Wilson⁴¹; *A Brief History of Fighting Ships* by David Tudor Davies⁴²; *Empires of the Sea: The Final Battle for the Mediterranean, 1521-1580* by Roger Crowley⁴³; *The High Life: Topmen in the Eighteenth-Century Navy* by Sam Willis⁴⁴; *Merchant Adventures: The voyage of discovery that transformed Tudor England* by James Evans⁴⁵; *Europe Between the Oceans* by Sir Barry Cunliffe⁴⁶; *The Last Crusade: The epic voyages of Vasco Da Gama* by Nigel Cliff⁴⁷; *Trade and Civilization in the India Ocean: an economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750* by K.N. Chauduri⁴⁸; *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783* by Alfred Thayer Mahan⁴⁹; *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in ancient and early medieval times* by George F. Hourani⁵⁰; *Boats of the World: From the Stone Age to Medieval Times* by Se’an McGrail⁵¹; *The Sea, Identity and History: From the Bengal to the South China Sea* by Satish Chandra & Himanshu Prabha Ray (ed.)⁵²; *The Lost Civilization of Lemuria: The Rise and Fall of the World’s Oldest Culture* by Frank Joseph⁵³; *Voyages that Changed the World* by Peter Aughton⁵⁴; *Jelajah Ulung Dunia: Perjalanan Para Penjelajah Besar* by Jon Balchin⁵⁵; *The Indian Ocean in World History* by Milo Kearney⁵⁶; *Maritime Southeast Asia to 1500* by Lynda Norenen Shaffer⁵⁷, and others.

In terms of the theme of research and writing by foreign historians, they also seem to be still limited to only certain themes related to trade, shipping, seafaring, shipping, ports, warfare at sea, and piracy. For example, the Dutch historian J.C. van Leur (1967) in his book entitled *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History* focused his study on early trade in Southeast Asia until the VOC concluded that the pattern of trading at that time was more of luxury goods, which was of high value for the European market.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, Meilink-Roelofs (1962) in his book entitled *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630* said that the trade of the period was massive, and marked by the trade of spices and pepper that required large ships.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the influence of trade for the development of coastal communities in Nusantara was studied by O.W. Wolters (2011) in his book entitled *Srivijaya Maritime Empire and World Business in the III-VII Centuries*. His study concluded that the emergence of early

kingdoms in Southeast Asia was the result of the reaction of locals who saw space and trading opportunities with foreign traders.⁶⁰

Kenneth R. Hall (1985) in his book *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* also linked the emergence of early kingdoms in Southeast Asia with the development of trade. Through his book, Hall summarised that the entry of foreign traders such as Arabs, Persians, Indians, and Chinese further enhanced trade in the region. This golden opportunity was fully utilised by local governments, who offered multiple commodities and facilities to foreign traders including establishing diplomatic relations, such as with China.⁶¹ Anthony Reid (1988) in his book *From Expansion to the Crisis of the Southeast Asian Global Trade Network 1450-1680* illustrated how the existence of various ports was crucial in determining the success of Southeast Asia's maritime trade, especially in determining shipping patterns, and how traders have taken advantage of the monsoon winds that blow regularly throughout the year.⁶²

Today, the awareness of local and foreign historians regarding the research and writing of maritime historiography in the Nusantara seems to have expanded into various themes such as books entitled *Orang Laut-Bajak Laut-Raja Laut: Sejarah Kawasan Laut Sulawesi Abad XIX*, *Sejarah Nusantara Sejarah Bahari and Pelayaran dan Perdagangan Nusantara Abad ke-16 dan 17* by A.B. Lopian;⁶³ *Pengantar Sejarah Maritim Indonesia* by Singgih Trisulistiyono;⁶⁴ *Atlantis, The Lost Continent Finally Found* by Arysia Santos;⁶⁵ *Poros Maritim* by Bernhard Limbong;⁶⁶ *Penjelajah Bahari: Pengaruh Peradaban Nusantara di Afrika* by Robert Dick-Read;⁶⁷ *Sejarah Maritim Indonesia* by Abd. Rahman Hamid;⁶⁸ *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires* by Armando Cortesao;⁶⁹ *Early Kingdoms of the Indonesian Islands and Peninsular Malaysia (Kerajaan-Kerajaan Awal Kepulauan Indonesia dan Semanjung Malaysia)* by Micheal Munoz;⁷⁰ *Dari Ekspansi hingga Krisis Jaringan Perdagangan Global Asia Tenggara 1450-1680*⁷¹ by Anthony Ried; *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630* by Meilink Roelfsz;⁷² and *The Sulu Zone: Commerce and the evolution of a multi-ethnic polity, 1768-1898* by James F. Warren.⁷³

In addition, there are other works such as *Early Kingdoms of the Indonesia Archipelago and the Malay Peninsula* by Paul Micheal Munoz;⁷⁴ *The Prahau, Traditional Sailing Boat of Indonesia* by Adrian Horroodge;⁷⁵ *Laut Nusantara* by Anugerah Nontji;⁷⁶ *The Malay Archipelago: the land of the orang-utan and the bird of paradise; a narrative of travel, with studies of man and nature (Kepulauan Nusantara: Sebuah Kisah Perjalanan, Kajian Manusia dan Alam)* by Alfred Russel Wallace;⁷⁷ *History of Maluku: Banda Naira, Ternate, Tidore and Ambon (Sejarah Maluku: Banda Naira, Ternate, Tidore dan Ambon)* by Des Alwi;⁷⁸ *Sejarah Indonesia Masa Praaksara* by Drs. Herimanto; *Nasionalisme, Laut dan Sejarah* by Susanto Zuhdi; *Austronesian in Sulawesi* by Truman Simanjuntak (ed.);⁷⁹ *Budaya Bahari dari Nusantara Menuju Maaram Modern* by Boy Rahardjo Sidiharta;⁸⁰ *Laut Nusantara* by Anugerah Nontij (1986) in *Budaya Bahari* by Djoko Pramono;⁸¹ *Jagad maritim: dialektika modernitas dan artikulasi kapitalisme pada komunitas Konjo pesisir di Sulawesi Selatan* by Darmawan Salman;⁸² *Al-Quran dan Kelautan (The Quran and the Sea)* by Agus S. Djamil; *Pengantar Ilmu Kelautan* by Wibisono; *Pemuda dan Kelautan* by Dr. Adhyaksa Dault; *Benua Maritim Indonesia* by Soekarto et. al.; *Ekonomi Kelautan* by S. Mulyadi;⁸³ *Phinisi Nusantara Pinisi Perkasa* by C. Kowaas dan Dwi Cahya Endah;⁸⁴ *Dunia Maritim Pamtai barat Sumatera* by Gusti Asnan;⁸⁵ *Laksmana Cheng Ho dan Asia Tenggara* by Leo Suryadinata, *Dari Pemungutan Tripang ke Penundaan Udag: Sejarah*

Perkembangan Perusahaan Perikanan di Borneo Utara 1750-1990 by Mohammad Raduan Mohd. Ariff;⁸⁶ *Perdagangan dan Perkapalan Melayu di Selat Melaka* by Ahmad Jelani Halimi;⁸⁷ *Kegemilangan Maritim Kesultanan Melayu Melaka* by Mohd. Samsudin, Zulkarnain Abdul Rahman and Aziz Ujang (ed.);⁸⁸ *Sejarah Peradaban Maritim and Sejarah dan Budaya Perlanungan di Kepulauan Borneo* by Ismail Ali,⁸⁹ and so on. Overall, it can be concluded that the research and writing by the abovementioned researchers have demonstrated the importance of the seas and oceans to the economic, political and social development agenda of traditional governments and today's independent governments.

The Theory of Sea Power and the Birth of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

It is common knowledge that about 71% of the earth's face is composed of water (oceans, rivers, lakes, and so on) and the remaining 28% is land, to the extent that this earth is known by a variety of names such as planet of water, the blue planet, and underwater world. The oceans cover 361 million square kilometres (139 million square miles) or 71% of the Earth's surface, with an estimated 1,348 million cubic kilometres (324 million square miles) of oceans at an average depth of about 3,733 metres (12,247 feet), the deepest ocean as deep as 11,022 metres (36,163 feet). There are five (5) of the world's major oceans: the Indian Ocean (28,400,000 square miles), the Pacific Ocean or shady ocean (64,000,000 square miles), the Atlantic Ocean (41,744,000 square miles), the Antarctic Ocean (12,451,000 square miles), and the Arctic Ocean (5,427,000 square miles).⁹⁰ This has directly brought a message of the vastness of the seas and oceans on the face of the earth and their importance to the building of human civilisation. This awareness of the importance of seas and oceans prompted UNESCO under the United Nations (UN) to enact the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1994 and establish a commission known as the World Freedom of the Seas Commission in Tokyo in 1995.⁹¹

In quoting the opening words of Mario Soares (Portugal) as chairman of this commission in the World Freedom of the Seas Commission Report themed "Our Oceans of The Future," he stated that "the sea is an invaluable, irreplaceable, and unchangeable property... the sea is a place with its special ability to unite the relationship between countries, form a spirit of unity, understanding, and solidarity. In the West, efforts to explore and traverse the oceans in an orderly manner were made by Prince Henry (Portugal) in 1418 by introducing the study of navigation and sending Portuguese ships throughout the world's oceans. Mario Soares in his opening words in the World Freedom of the Seas Commission Report illustrates Portugal's enthusiasm for exploring and navigating the seas, citing the words of a Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa: "the sea is filled with salt, but how many of you know it is actually the tears of Portugal".⁹²

The initiative of Prince Henry gave birth to many of the world's most accomplished sailors and explorers of seas and oceans such as Bartholomeu Diaz (1450-1500) who reached Africa and Vasco da Gama who made it to India.⁹³ Ferdinand Magellan (1480-1521) circumnavigated the world and arrived in the Philippines between 1519-1522.⁹⁴ Similarly, an accomplished Spanish sailor and explorer named Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) successfully landed in the Americas in 1492.⁹⁵ Besides Portugal and Spain, the British also

had some prominent sailors and explorers such as James Cook (1728-1779) who reached Antarctica, Sir Francis Drake (1545-1596) to the Pacific Ocean, Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618) to America and others.⁹⁶ France also had some prominent sailors and explorers such as Jacques Cartier (1491-1557) who arrived in North America and Louis Joliet (1645-1700) to Canada.⁹⁷ These voyages and explorations allowed Portugal, Spain, Britain, France, and others to emerge as the world's major maritime powers in the 15th century. In the east, the sailors and explorers who came from the Nusantara and China to the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean were no less great, and were said to predate Western sailors and explorers. For example, China through its accomplished sailor Zheng He is said to have made seven voyages to the Indian Ocean (India, Persia, Africa and Nusantara) with the size of its ships and fleet numbers much larger than the West. Unlike the West, the voyages and explorations undertaken by China were not aimed at colonisation, but trade and diplomatic relations only.⁹⁸ The importance of the region's seas was described by Ong Jin Eong & Gong Wooi Khoon (2001:8) in the book entitled *The Seas* as follows:

“For centuries these easily navigated waters have been at the heart of, first, Southeast Asian and then later world maritime trade. These trades brought waves of traders and travelers from China, India and further afield including Arabia and Europe, all of which have influenced the cultures and traditions that developed throughout the country.”⁹⁹

The world's major marine and ocean interests in terms of politics and economics have shown the emergence of various figures, academics, and thinkers from all over the world in the maritime field. Through their study and writing, they finally succeeded in proving the importance of the seas and oceans to a country that has beaches and seas, and finally created various theories of the ocean to become the academic discipline it is today. Among these figures include Fernand Braudel, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and Adrian Bernard Lapian. Fernand Braudel was born on August 24, 1902, a French historian best known as a supporter of the "Annales School" who introduced a term in history known as Total History. The study of maritime history for the first time was pioneered by Braudel through his book, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II (La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Epoque de Philippe II)*, which studies the history of the Mediterranean or *Mare Nostrum* in Latin.¹⁰⁰

This book on the Mediterranean Sea marked the early development of "structural history" that pays attention to the influence of the sea on economic and political changes. According to Braudel, the sea (in this case referring to the Mediterranean Sea) is an entity that integrates various socio-cultural elements of numerous social and ethnic groups living in the Mediterranean region. In other words, Braudel concluded that the history of the Mediterranean region is a history of "interconnection" among the various cultures and societies living around the Mediterranean Sea covering North Africa, Western Asia, and Southern and Western Europe. In his research, Braudel found that for centuries the Mediterranean Sea has served as a bridge and channel that has created a very diverse cultural, economic, and political exchange. According to Braudel, before the *Annales* writing approach, his research and writing focused only on *courte durée* (short duration) or *histoire événementielle* (historical events) and stated that historians paid less attention to political and diplomatic history (*histoire événementielle*).¹⁰¹

Meanwhile, Alfred Thayer Mahan (Rear Admiral) who is best known as the founder of the Sea-Power and Sea-Naval Theory was born on September 28, 1840, in New York, United

States, and was an officer in the U.S. Navy in the 20th century. Throughout his career as a marine, he recorded his experience and thoughts on the power of the sea. Through several of his works such as *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812*, and *The Major Operations of the Navies in the War of American Independence*, for the first time in history, the term Sea Power was used, which eventually made America the world's major sea power. Mahan's ability as an American marine strategist and thinker led to him being named "the most important American strategist of the nineteenth century" by John Keegan.¹⁰²

Mahan, who is famously known for the theory of Sea-Power and Sea Naval (1890), stated that to become a strong maritime state, full attention should be paid to the strength of the state's naval fleet to ensure the continuity of territorial sovereignty, economy, and welfare of the country. Through this theory, Mahan proposed six (6) important elements that need to be supported by a country to develop into a maritime state, namely three elements related to natural conditions and three elements related to population: geographical position, physical conformation, extent of territory, character of the people, number of population, and character of government.¹⁰³

Aside from the West, the Southeast Asian Islands also had no dearth of great figures in the maritime field, namely Adrian Bernard Lopian who is famous for his theory on Nusantara history Bahari history, to the extent of being named Southeast Asia's "father of maritime". Lopian, who was born on September 1, 1929, in Tegal, Central Java, was an excellent scholar in the field of Indonesian maritime history. Through the various writings he produced, his prose and thought projections have greatly realigned the historiography of maritime history in Indonesia. He was named "the first captain of Southeast Asian maritime historians" by Shahril Talib Robert at the 15th International Association of Historians of Asia (IAHA) Conference in Jakarta in 1998. Through his dissertation entitled *Orang Laut, Bajak Laut dan Raja Laut: Suatu Kajian Laut Sulawesi Abad XIX*, the book entitled *Pelayaran dan Perniagaan Nusantara Abad Ke-16 dan 17*, and later through his speech entitled *Sejarah Nusantara Sejarah Bahari* in 1991 at his inauguration as Professor at the Faculty of Literature, University of Indonesia, Lopian demonstrated the importance of maritime as the main setting for the formation of Nusantara history rather than being seen only as peripheral history. In general, there are several of Lopian's contributions to the thinking and historiography of maritime history in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Through his abovementioned speech, although the words Nusantara and *bahari* are not synonymous, A.B. Lopian successfully illustrated the association of these two words to become one meaning.¹⁰⁴

According to Lopian, the island represented by "Nusa" refers to Java and "antara" means other islands. The word 'bahari' on the other hand as defined in the KBBI means a long time ago, beautiful, or very good in reference to the sea. Hence, Lopian deduced that the words Nusantara and *bahari* mean "a beautiful past (history) at sea". Lopian also showed how the seas in the Nusantara (Java Sea, Flores Sea, Banda Sea, and Celebes Sea) play an important role in connecting and uniting land-island communities in Indonesia. In the essence of his speech, Lopian expressly stated that when discussing the history of the Nusantara, whether one wants to or not, the marine aspect is to be noted. According to Lopian again, when we talk about the history of Nusantara, the maritime aspect will always stand out on its own. Without this aspect, its history only revolves around the separate islands. In other words, Lopian opined that the history of Nusantara and Southeast Asia should be seen from a global perspective and not the local or nation-state history.¹⁰⁵

Through many of his writings, Lapien also corrected the perception of "an island surrounded by the sea," which is common, but rather, it is a "sea sprinkled with islands." He also changed the term hinter-land to hinter-sea to describe the true state of Indonesia's geography. Lapien also introduced the theory of sea systems to study the history of Indonesia, where the sea is seen as a unity of systems that are positioned as the main factor that integrates the islands to form the networks that create civilisations at sea. According to Lapien again, the territory of Indonesia should be seen from its sea units (sea-system). Unlike continental countries that are focused on the land (heart-land), for Indonesia, its attention is more on the sea (heart-sea) such as the Java Sea, Banda Sea, Sawu Sea, Seram Sea, Maluku Sea, and Aru Sea. Straits and bays should also be viewed as sea systems.¹⁰⁶

Through his dissertation entitled *Orang Laut, Bajak Laut dan Raja Laut: Suatu Kajian Laut Sulawesi Abad XIX*, he succeeded in correcting the negative perception and interpretation of pirates. Lapien asserted that any act of piracy that was considered to be a crime at sea in the eyes of the colonial powers should also be viewed from aspects of total history, culture, and environment that influenced their historical journey. In other words, the history of pirates should not only be viewed from a western-centric perspective but also from an Indonesian and Malay-centric Archipelago perspective. Hendrik Niemeyer (2004) in an article entitled *A Sea of History - A History of Seas* which he wrote based on his interview with Lapien demonstrated how Lapien viewed the sea as a human life that occupies the space of the past that continues to move into the present.¹⁰⁷

In other words, the vastness, length, and depth of human life are in the span of time. Lapien also once floated his idea that "*if we continue to sail as far as we possibly can, we will eventually reach the mainland.*" This refers to the understanding that all land, including islands and seas, should be seen as an inseparable entity, which became the basis for the term "Tanah Air bangsa Indonesia" (Indonesian homeland). According to Lapien, the approach to Indonesia's maritime history should see its entire territorial waters as a unifier that integrates thousands of separated islands. In addition, Lapien also laid the foundations of maritime history studies in Indonesia by introducing several important concepts and theories to be used as a guide in the research and writing of future maritime historians. Hence, Anthony Reid who reviewed the book *Orang Laut, Bajak Laut dan Raja Laut* by Lapien stated that "*no Scholar in Indonesia has demonstrated his expertise as a better historian than Adrian B. Lapien*".¹⁰⁸

By taking historical facts and the significance of the seas and oceans into consideration of the world's political and economic agenda today, we can see the race among the world's maritime powers to dominate the region's various seas and oceans to the extent that the 21st century is regarded as the Asia-Pacific century. China has emerged as the world's first power to take this agenda seriously with the idea of the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" and One Belt One Road (OBOR) before it was converted into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was inspired by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. In general, this idea is aimed at restoring the glorious history of the South China Sea as the main route taken by western and eastern sailors and traders of old, and linking this sea with the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean for common prosperity. At the same time, the idea also aimed to reduce tensions between China and countries in the region as an effect of sovereign conflicts and territorial boundaries between China and other countries in Southeast Asia. China's actions began by claiming most of the territory in the South China Sea based on historical and nine-dash line factors. China also began developing several islands and reefs, especially in the Paracel

Islands and Spratly Islands, which created tensions in the region, resulting in the intervention of outside powers.¹⁰⁹

Although there has been opposition to the implementation of this BRI idea for several reasons, it should not be used as an excuse by Malaysia to not make preparations if one day this opposition comes to an end, and this idea can be implemented based on mutual prosperity. Until now, Malaysia's policy to support this idea appears to be realised with the establishment of cooperation between Malaysia and Chinese investors in infrastructure development (ports and transportation) on the east coast of West Malaysia through the ECRL mega project, which is expected to be completed in 2024, and will also be a part of the new silk route.¹¹⁰ In comparison, it can be said that the Republic of Indonesia is among the first countries in Southeast Asia to support the idea of BRI inspired by China. At the 9th East Asia Summit on November 13, 2014 in Myanmar, President Jokowi made it clear that Indonesia will support this idea by issuing a bold doctrine referred to as the Idea of Indonesia as the World's Maritime Axis. According to Jokowi, Indonesia, which has a long maritime history set in maritime, has the status of an island state, and as a maritime country will utilise all seas and oceans including its islands as a route for cross-border world trade and for prosperity of the Indonesian people. To this end, Jokowi outlined five (5) principles to make Indonesia the world's maritime axis as follows: (1) to redevelop its maritime culture; (2) to maintain and manage marine resources; (3) infrastructure development and maritime connectivity; (4) maritime diplomacy; and (5) develop a maritime defence force (Bernhard Limbong: 2015). This idea was officially enacted through the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. For this purpose, the Indonesian government has empowered the Ministry of Coordination and Maritime Affairs to coordinate the ideas and implement BRI in Indonesia.¹¹¹

Malaysia Towards a Maritime Country: Hopes and Challenges

Hans-Dieter Evers (2017) in his inaugural lecture delivered at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) entitled *Connecting Oceans: Malaysia as a Maritime Nation*, studied the status and position of Malaysia as a maritime country from the perspective of the Maritime Potential Index (MPI) in the context of ASEAN with countries bordering seas and oceans such as Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore. In his study and writing, Evers (2017) raised several questions concerning this matter, such as, "...*Has Malaysia taken advantage of its geopolitical location between the Indian Ocean, South China Sea and Pacific Ocean? Has Malaysia fulfilled its historic and geopolitical role in "connecting the oceans"? Has Malaysia become a "maritime country" in terms of its economy, socio-cultural awareness, and its policies" as among the prerequisites for becoming a maritime nation? Has Malaysia used its location as a sustainable resource? Does Malaysia really connect the oceans? And has Malaysia used its geographical position between the seas and the Mediterranean ocean completely? Has Malaysia also implemented the corresponding maritime policy to achieve a position as a fully developed maritime country?"*¹¹²

After the fall of the Nusantara which was championed by Patih Gadjah Madah through the Majaphit Kingdom in the 14th century¹¹³, the process of colonisation and settlement of Western powers, the outbreak of the Second World War, the opposition and struggle for independence, and finally the emergence of various independent nation-states that are

sovereign in the region have shown a change in viewpoints and directions of socio-political-economic development based on the sea, ports, and trade to land-based political-social-economic development characterised by agriculture, farming, mining, industry, and services. In other words, the nation-states in the Southeast Asian region that was once superior, riding on the provision of the seas and oceans, appeared to no longer want to return to their traditional status as a marine empire, but instead strived towards a new status, namely as a modern country, developing towards the status of developed countries whose development is measured through the achievement of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) characterised by industry, financial centres and so on.¹¹⁴

In other words, the majority of nation-states in the region seemed to reduce marine sector services except for oil and gas-based industries and maritime-based tourism. Policies that did not consider marine services as among the main agendas in the development framework led to a "*period of marginalisation and decline*" of numerous elements of marine-based infrastructure development such as ports, marine resources, territorial declines, poverty among seafaring communities, and so on. This has indirectly resulted in various development issues among the countries in this area such as development imbalance, poverty, territorial setbacks, and so on. The importance of seas and oceans in the country's development agenda, achieving developed nation status and the well-being of its people has been demonstrated by Singapore. Although in principle, the country is not endowed with a diversity of natural resources, it is capable of emerging as a developed country in this area due to its policies that do not turn its back on its marine history, and continue to make it a "space and opportunity" to move forward.¹¹⁵

Today, the world continues to recognize Singapore as a maritime nation, which is the focus of the world's merchant ships and acts as an entrepot state to be the entry and distributor of the world's various commodities to the region and across the globe.¹¹⁶ The history of Indonesia, which was once the world's main marine power, was overshadowed by the Srivijaya and Majapahit Kingdoms, then experienced a period of decline under the Dutch colonials, while also trying to restore its traditional golden age after gaining independence in 1945.¹¹⁷ Right from the era of President Soekarno's government until the current President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), Indonesia's government has shown various efforts to re-establish its marine history. Starting with the struggle succeeding, Indonesia gained the status of an archipelago and maritime country through UNCLOS 1982, which was later used as a maritime policy through legislation as evidences by the Sumpah Pemuda (Youth Oath), Pancasila, Gagasan Nusantara, and the establishment of the Department of Marine Affairs and Fisheries. The most recent Idea of Indonesia as the World's Maritime Axis has opened a new page of history for Indonesia to make its seas and oceans a "space and opportunity" to move forward. Hence, Indonesia is attempting to change the mentality and perception of its people to revisit the seas and oceans with the ideology that "*the sea is not a divider, but a unifier of the Republic of Indonesia and the Indonesian people.*"¹¹⁸

Until today, Malaysia and other countries in the Southeast Asian Archipelago such as Brunei, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Myanmar still seem to not have a clear and accurate policy and police regarding the direction of economic-political-social development of the ocean. What is clear is that these countries still see the ocean in isolation and not as a total or complete 'unifier' within the framework of its development. Apart from that, these countries seem to pay more attention to the issue of sovereignty and political tensions impacting China's claims in the South China Sea, and in the matter of BRI, they are merely

taking a wait-and-see stance. This has led to the BRI plan initiated by China involving countries in the region being unable to be fully implemented. Today, the direction and economic development of countries in the region are still dependent on oil and gas sectors, ports, and marine-based tourism which are always vulnerable to the various economic slumps of the world. In other words, the branches of the marine world such as the fishing industry, regional and island development, seafaring community development, and infrastructure development that is closely related to marine or maritime are still not integrated into the context of BRI.¹¹⁹

Unlike other countries in the Southeast Asian Archipelago such as Brunei, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar, Malaysia has in principle shown efforts to support the BRI's idea of achieving its mission and vision as a maritime state; however, this effort does not seem to be clearly emitted in its ideas and development framework. For example, beginning with the Look East Policy, the idea of 1Malaysia, and most recently the idea of Common Prosperity all do not seem to clearly show where this marine agenda is at its position. What is clear is the worldview and the mentality of policymakers and people in this country is still based on the elements of the land, and the seas and oceans are only seen as a space for excitement, a geopolitical border between states, and even as something frightening. The history of the ancestors of the Malay sailors in the region has proven that the seas and oceans whose waves have broken over these regions have been able to connect us with the outside world, and because of its merits, the traditional countries in the region were once recorded on the world map as being the focus of the world's sailors and traders, and succeeded in building an impressive and highly respected civilisation that impressed the world's powerful and mighty.¹²⁰

It is acknowledged that Malaysia-China relations during the Tunku Abdul Rahman era were limited due to Malaysia's political situation at the beginning of independence, which was still overshadowed by the British anti-China policy through the Anglo-Malaya Defence Treaty on 12 October 1957 and Malaysia's economic pattern in the form of *laissez-faire ala the West*. However, this policy changed when Abdul Razak passed the New Economic Policy; Hussin Onn; Dr. Mahathir Mohammad with his Look East Policy, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi with his National Integrity Plan Policy; Mohd. Najib Tun Abdul Razak with the idea of 1Malaysia, and Muhyiddin Yassin who worked to build the country's administration and has strengthened bilateral ties with China by seeing it as a partner in the development agenda.¹²¹ As previously explained, the emergence of the idea of BRI by China has led to the history of the South China Sea changing from the Classic Silk Road to the Route New Maritime Silk Route. In addition, the changing world agenda today which is beginning to see the world's seas and oceans as valuable and highly strategic assets, both economically and politically, seems to no longer be denied by Malaysia and the regional countries in Southeast Asia.¹²²

With regards to the historical realities and realities of the present, it is time for Malaysia to look back on the role and importance of the seas and oceans in the context of Malaysia itself and the Southeast Asian Islands nations in line with the *Gagasan Kemakmuran Bersama* (Shared Prosperity Idea) inspired by the present government.¹²³ During the birth of the BRI in 2013, various initiatives were taken by the Malaysian government such as the establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative National Secretariat (BRINS) in 2017 under the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) and then MITI to coordinate the BRI agenda. With the help of financial and technical financing from China, Malaysia has developed various infrastructure and infrastructure networks such as upgrading the Kuantan

port, the construction of the East Coast Railway Link (ECRL) project, the construction of Bandar Malaysia, the Melaka Gateway project and others including the signing of various multi-million ringgit memoranda of understanding, and is expected to accelerate the balance of regional and territorial development in Malaysia.¹²⁴

Reempowering Malaysia's Maritime Agenda in the BRI Doctrine

As previously explained, the announcement of the OBOR doctrine by China in 2013 which subsequently turned into BRI appears to have begun to become the development agenda for countries in the Asian and European regions today. Deserts, hills and settlements in mainland Asia that were once marginalised from the tide of development appear to have now begun to awaken, and are connected to urban centres and the outside world as a result of the reconstruction of various infrastructures on the classic silk road through the BRI. Across the sea and straits in the region connected to the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the hustle and bustle of merchant ships from different parts of the world carrying various commodities through the Straits of Malacca, South China Sea, Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, Java Sea and so on reflect the growth of various ports in the region. Based on this reality, it is time for Malaysia to take the maritime space and opportunities it offers to further accelerate its development agenda and mission to become a maritime nation. For this purpose, Malaysia cannot act alone in realising its maritime agenda because maritime's nature is not the same as land, and should be developed jointly with neighbouring countries and the world. In other words, Malaysia and the countries in the region may have no choice but to adapt themselves and find space and opportunities as a result of this BRI.

What Malaysia needs to do is to have a clear and robust policy in facing this BRI agenda so that the issues and questions mentioned earlier can be overcome or at least minimised. In line with the 2030 Shared Prosperity Vision planned by present-day Malaysia and the transfer of Indonesia's administrative capital from Jakarta to Kalimantan, the time has also come as well for Malaysia's BRI agenda to take into consideration the geo-strategic and geo-economic issues of other regions in Malaysia such as Sabah and Sarawak. Currently, infrastructure development involving marine aspects such as ports and railway networks focus mainly on the west and south coasts of Peninsular Malaysia against the waters of the Straits of Melaka. Hence, the time is ripe for the BRI agenda and Malaysia's marine agenda to look to east Malaysia, such as reconsidering Kudat, which is located north of Sabah, as a new hub of world-class ports due to its strategic position in the South China Sea and in the geopolitical context of the region. In addition to Kudat, Tawau, which is located on the east coast of Sabah by the Celebes Sea and bordered by Indonesia and the Philippines also has a fairly strategic position, and has the potential to be developed as a port hub and entrepot for Kalimantan, which has become the administrative capital of the Republic of Indonesia.¹²⁵

Figure 1: Position of Kudat and Tawau in the Context of the South China Sea, Sulu Sea, and Celebes Sea



It is acknowledged that there are various issues and questions that have been raised about Malaysia's presence in the BRI such as lack of clear policies, reliance on China, plunging into a high debt burden, only benefiting China, reducing sovereignty i.e. land ownership transfer, positive impact to the people, and so on. According to Muhammad Azwan Abd. Rahman, (2018):

“However, Malaysia in cooperation with China in the Chinese Maritime Silk Road projects still does not have a clear policy framework especially in the form of legislation, impact, and distribution of actual benefits within the country as well as well-being for the people.”¹²⁶

Evers (2017) also debated this; despite that in principle Malaysia is strategically positioned to connect the seas and oceans in the region and the world, it still faces various political and economic uncertainties. Apart from paying attention to the direction of administration and development in Malaysia, one of the main points that are central to Malaysia's success as a maritime nation is the willingness of the people to uphold this doctrine. In this regard, the efforts of the government will certainly face difficulties if the main prerequisites of this agenda's mentality are not resolved first, i.e. by first changing the mentality and perception of the people in the country.¹²⁷ This matter was addressed by Muhammad Ridwan Alimuddin (2013) in his book *Mengapa Kita Belum Cinta Laut?* (Why Haven't We Yet Loved the Sea?), in reaction to those against the Idea of Indonesia as the World's Maritime Axis introduced by Indonesia's government. In his writing, he showed that the various obstacles in the efforts of the Republic of Indonesia to achieve this idea were because the main prerequisite, i.e. the change in mentality and marine spirit among its people, has not yet been fully realised:

“That is the sadness, the sea is getting further and further away for those who do not understand. But try and see how the fishermen did not in the slightest let the news that dampened their courage to continue to go to sea until the body is no longer able to. Once the sail is raised, there is no turning back to the shore. Let me stress this, it is not the fault of the sea! Indeed, there are many reasons that we can use as a scapegoat for the cause of the disaster.

Without denying God's power, this event should be regretted. But not with tears or by blaming others, at the very least we shall not repeat it again. Let's go to sea."¹²⁸

Therefore, it is time for the education system (schools and IPTA) and based on skills and technical abilities that will produce local manpower resources in the country paying due attention to technical knowledge and skills in the maritime field. Looking at the syllabus and curriculum of the country's education, it does not seem to be focused on the aspects of history and scope and open economic opportunities in the maritime sector. This has indirectly resulted in the young generation's knowledge and interest in the maritime sector is limited, resulting in Malaysia having to rely on energy from outside to develop its marine sectors such as in the shipping, fisheries, ports and oil rig industries, dominated by overseas energy such as from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and so on. Based on this issue, it is time for the government and people of the country to pay proper attention to the marine sector by transforming the education system and re-empowering marine-based technical centres as well as embracing the marine world again so that the idea of Malaysia as a maritime country can be achieved.

Conclusion

History has proven that Malaysia, through the old kingdoms and the Malacca Malay Sultanate before the colonial era of western powers, had achieved thalassocracy status or that of a well-known maritime government in the maritime history of the world. Through various activities based on the seas and oceans, these traditional kingdoms were able to develop and build their own civilisations. However, with the colonisation process by western powers and the change of worldview from being sea-based to land for hundreds of years, the role and contribution of the sea in the national development agenda from independence until now has been marginalised and forgotten. Earlier thinkers of the marine world had suggested that a country with beaches should rule and utilise territorial and open seas. The truth of this suggestion was evidenced by maritime history when western powers such as Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, England, France and others in the 15th century successfully utilised the seas and the oceans and eventually emerged as the world's major powers. Although the history of this country and other countries in the Southeast Asian region has undergone the process of colonisation and the rejection of marine resources for hundreds of years, it cannot continue to be used as an excuse to not look back to the sea and the ocean as a strategy for development. This has been proven by several countries in Asia such as Korea, China, and Japan which in the past had experienced a period of decline, but have now emerged as the world's main maritime nations when their governments began to re-develop their maritime economy and politics. By re-developing various marine infrastructures characterised by advanced technology, it has allowed these countries to become a port and shipping hub and dominate the export-import of trading commodities from various parts of the world. Hence, this idea or doctrine of BRI inspired by China which has started to benefit Asia should be taken advantage of by Malaysia by ensuring it has clear short-term and long-term policies, and that Malaysia's mission and vision as a maritime country are fully supported by the Malaysian people.

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