

The Role of the South China Sea, Sulu Sea, and Celebes Sea as Catalysts for Malaysia’s Agenda as a Global Maritime Nation

Ismail Ali: Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia.
E-mail: ismailrc@ums.edu.my

ABSTRACT: *The Sulu Sea and Celebes Sea are two important maritime areas that connect Malaysia with neighboring countries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. In the context of Malaysia’s geopolitics, geo-economics, and geostrategy, these seas play a significant role in influencing the country's foreign policy, maritime security, and regional and international relations. This article aims to examine the importance of the South China Sea, Sulu Sea, and Celebes Sea to Malaysia, with a focus on aspects related to maritime boundaries, maritime security threats, and the management of natural resources. The central question addressed is how these maritime regions affect Malaysia’s political and economic stability, as well as the challenges the country faces in ensuring continued maritime security and regional stability. This study adopts a qualitative approach by analyzing various data sources, including official documents, international reports, and previous studies on the geopolitics of the South China Sea, Sulu Sea, and Celebes Sea. This methodology allows for a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities Malaysia encounters in navigating maritime issues. The article applies theories of geopolitics, geo-economics, and geostrategy within a conceptual framework that views these seas as central to the interests of major powers and regional actors involved in the contest for natural resources and control of global trade routes. The discussion highlights several key issues, including territorial boundary disputes between Malaysia and neighboring countries, security threats arising from piracy and transnational crime, and Malaysia’s role in ensuring the sustainability of valuable marine resources. Findings indicate that, although Malaysia has substantial strategic interests in these seas, numerous challenges remain. These must be addressed through regional diplomacy, strengthened maritime security cooperation, and enhanced enforcement of maritime law.*

Key words: Celebes sea, geo-economics, geopolitics, geostrategy, South China sea, sulu sea.

1. Introduction

The Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea are three maritime zones that play a vital role in maritime history, international trade, and the geopolitics of Southeast Asia. These seas are not only rich in natural resources but are also located along strategic routes that connect East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the wider world, making them critical areas of focus in maritime studies and international relations. Understanding the origins of their names, their geographic locations, maritime features, and significance is essential for grasping their role in history and modern geopolitics. The names of these seas are deeply tied to local societies, cultures, and the history of powerful maritime kingdoms in the region. The Sulu Sea refers to the waters between the Sulu Archipelago in the Philippines and the eastern islands of Sabah, Malaysia. The name “Sulu” is derived from the Sulu Sultanate, which once dominated the area and served as a significant cultural and trading hub in Southeast Asia.

The Celebes Sea is located between Sulawesi (formerly Celebes) in Indonesia and the Mindanao islands in the Philippines. The name “Celebes” originates from a major port along the coast of Sulawesi, which was a key trading center in earlier times. The Celebes Sea serves as a vital link between the Sulu Sea and the Molucca Sea and as a maritime route between Southeast Asia and Oceania. The South China Sea encompasses



a larger expanse of water situated between the Malay Peninsula, Borneo, and Vietnam. Its name reflects the influence of ancient Chinese empires, which played a pivotal role in trade across the region. The South China Sea is a major conduit for trade between China, Southeast Asia, and Europe. Geographically, the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea are each distinct and diverse in their physical features. The Sulu Sea is relatively narrow, located between the Sulu Archipelago and Sabah. It is known for its rich coral reefs and marine biodiversity. Geographically, the Sulu Sea lies at a crossroads connecting Southeast Asia with the Pacific Ocean, making it an important zone for ancient and modern maritime trade.

The Celebes Sea lies south of the Sulu Sea, separating Sulawesi from Mindanao. It is broader and deeper than the Sulu Sea and serves as one of the maritime corridors linking various parts of Southeast Asia. Its geographic uniqueness lies in its strategic position for navigation from the Sulu Sea to the Molucca Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Meanwhile, the South China Sea is a vast maritime area encompassing much of the waters between countries such as China, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, and Taiwan. This sea has varying depths, with some areas being very deep and others shallower, such as the waters around the Spratly Islands. The uniqueness of the South China Sea lies in its position connecting East Asia and Southeast Asia, as well as its importance as an international trade route. The Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea are all maritime areas of strategic significance in the global context. Their importance in maritime studies is immense, as these three seas serve as key corridors for global maritime trade, linking East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the wider world.

The South China Sea has become a focal point of geopolitical tensions among countries involved in territorial disputes, which concern natural resource interests and critical sea lanes that connect the region to the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In addition, all three seas are endowed with abundant natural resources, including energy sources such as oil and gas, as well as marine resources vital to the economies of the coastal nations. This wealth of resources renders the region highly valuable geopolitically and has made it a zone of competition among major world powers. Studies of the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea are also essential to understanding the maritime history of Southeast Asia. These three seas have long served as major sea routes for ancient maritime kingdoms that used these waters for trade, expanding political influence, and spreading culture. For example, empires such as Srivijaya and Majapahit capitalized on their strategic positions in the South China Sea and Celebes Sea to dominate maritime trade between India and China. Thus, the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea are significant not only in terms of maritime geography but also in historical and geopolitical terms. Their unique geography and strategic location make them critical hubs in global maritime trade. In-depth studies of these seas will not only provide insights into maritime history but also into international relations and the geopolitical challenges faced by the countries along their shores.

2. Background of the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea

These three seas are maritime zones located among several Southeast Asian countries. They have played vital roles in the maritime civilizations of Southeast Asia and the wider world—politically, economically, culturally, and in trade—since ancient times. Their importance extends beyond the surrounding nations to a global scale, especially in international trade involving various ancient maritime kingdoms of Southeast Asia. Since ancient times, the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea have served as crossroads for diverse cultures and peoples. The Sulu Sea connects eastern Sabah, southern Philippines, and northern Indonesia. The Celebes Sea, located between the Philippines and Sulawesi, has functioned as a key passageway for travel and exchange between Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Meanwhile, the South China Sea has been a crucial trade route for more than two millennia, linking major countries such as China, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Since the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), the South China Sea has served as a primary maritime trade corridor, especially for spices and textiles. Along this route, powerful maritime kingdoms such as Srivijaya, Majapahit, and Malacca flourished due to their strategic locations.

Beyond their roles as trade routes, the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea are also rich in vital natural resources. These seas are not only home to exceptional biodiversity but also contain valuable mineral and petroleum resources. Their coral reefs, fish stocks, and other marine products make them key fishing grounds. Furthermore, the discovery of oil and gas reserves beneath the South China Sea has made it a region of immense geopolitical and economic value. Ancient maritime powers such as Srivijaya, Majapahit, and Malacca exploited their strategic positions in the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea to engage in



trade involving spices, textiles, and other natural commodities. Srivijaya, for instance, dominated trade routes in the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea from the 7th to the 13th century.

This kingdom became a major trading hub between India and China, making it a key connector in international trade at the time. The Majapahit Empire, which flourished in the 14th century, also leveraged the strength of its naval fleet to dominate trade in the Celebes Sea and Sulu Sea. Their maritime and trading systems linked various regions in Southeast Asia, including present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The success of these kingdoms was also rooted in their control over major trade routes, including the South China Sea. Malacca, which rose in the 15th century, became a leading maritime trade center in the South China Sea, connecting traders from the Middle East, India, China, and Europe. Its strategic location along the Strait of Malacca enabled it to control major trade routes between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, making it one of the most influential maritime kingdoms of its time.

Trade routes in the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea have been used since ancient times by traders from various nations. Indian and Arab merchants brought spices, silk, and luxury goods to China and Southeast Asia. The South China Sea became a critical area in the spice trade, linking major ports across Southeast Asia, India, and China. Meanwhile, maritime travel between Borneo, the Philippines, and Indonesia facilitated cultural and economic exchanges that flourished over the centuries. In ancient times, seafaring was carried out using traditional sailing vessels reinforced with natural navigation technologies, such as the stars and monsoon winds. These voyages involved long-distance travel, with major ports such as Malacca, Palembang, and Makassar serving as key trade centers along these routes. Today, the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea are not only rich in natural resources but also serve as highly strategic areas in geopolitical terms. The South China Sea has become a flashpoint of tension between China and Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia, all of which have territorial claims in the area. The significance of natural resources like oil and gas, as well as vital shipping lanes, makes the region highly sensitive politically.

Furthermore, the rapid pace of global economic development underscores the importance of the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea as key channels for international cargo shipment. Countries like Malaysia and Indonesia are strengthening cooperation in maritime security within the region to ensure the smooth flow of trade and to curb threats such as terrorism and smuggling. The Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea have a long and rich history in maritime trade. They served as the main routes for ancient maritime kingdoms to conduct trade, and to this day, the region remains a critical hub in global geopolitics and economics. The wealth of natural resources and the region's strategic location make it exceptionally important in the global context. In the modern era, regional cooperation and maritime security efforts in this area were key to ensuring the smooth functioning of global trade and political stability in Southeast Asia.

3. Research Methodology

The study of the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea requires a comprehensive approach that combines multiple research methods, relevant sources, and the application of appropriate theories and frameworks to understand the historical, geopolitical, and economic contexts of these maritime areas. The main aim of this study is to examine the historical maritime connections, the role of trade and navigation, and territorial conflicts related to the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea. This methodology will address several important aspects, including the methods used for data collection, the sources consulted, the underlying theories, and the theoretical framework guiding the research. The primary method employed in this study is in-depth literature review, which involves analyzing historical sources, official documents, and prior research on these maritime areas. This literature review emphasizes written materials such as books, journal articles, research reports, and historical documents related to the maritime kingdoms that once ruled in these areas, as well as the development of trade and navigation.

For example, the study of the Srivijaya kingdom's control over the Sulu Sea and the Majapahit Empire's influence in the Celebes Sea provides insight into how these kingdoms dominated key trade routes and expanded their influence across Southeast Asia. The literature review will also cover documents discussing current geopolitical issues, including territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and analyze the foreign policies of the countries involved in these conflicts. The second method is a qualitative approach used to analyze data gathered from historical and geopolitical sources. Interviews with maritime historians, diplomats, and political practitioners will be conducted to provide deeper perspectives on the social, economic, and



political dynamics occurring in the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea. This approach is crucial for understanding the views and experiences of those directly involved in managing and negotiating maritime security and territorial disputes in the region. Additionally, the study will include case analyses of historical events and conflicts involving countries bordering the South China Sea and Celebes Sea.

To enhance the accuracy of the study, a quantitative method will also be used to analyze maritime trade data, natural resource statistics, and shipping activity in the region. Statistical data obtained from international trade reports, maritime economic studies, and analyses of natural resources in the South China Sea—such as oil, gas, and marine products—will help to understand the region’s economic importance in a global context. This quantitative analysis will provide a clear picture of the relationship between natural resources in the area and the economies of the countries involved, as well as offer an objective perspective on issues such as resource exploitation and its impact on maritime security.

In addition, the use of geoinformation and mapping technology will also be employed to highlight the geographical position and strategic areas in the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea. The use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can visualize major trade routes, areas rich in natural resources, as well as zones that are the focus of territorial disputes, particularly in the South China Sea. This will help to better understand how the geographical position of these areas influences maritime security and geopolitics in Southeast Asia. The sources for this study include historical materials that record the development of maritime kingdoms in Southeast Asia, such as works that discuss the influence of the Srivijaya, Majapahit, and Melaka empires. Books and journal articles discussing the history of maritime trade and navigation in the Sulu Sea and Celebes Sea will be used to provide a deeper context of the region’s past. In addition, geopolitical reports on the South China Sea published by institutions such as ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the United Nations will serve as key sources for analyzing the territorial conflicts involving the littoral states of the South China Sea.

The theory employed in this study is the theory of maritime geopolitics, which emphasizes the importance of geographical position in determining a nation’s power and influence. This theory, outlined by geostrategic such as Alfred Mahan, will assist in understanding how states that control the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea can strengthen their dominance through control over maritime trade routes. Additionally, theories of security and international relations will also be applied to analyze territorial disputes in the South China Sea, as well as diplomatic efforts taken to ease tensions in the region. This research framework will guide the researcher to examine the geopolitical, economic, and historical impacts of the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea on the countries along their coasts. The study will also focus on the maritime security dimension and the importance of these seas in the global context, as well as the implications for international relations and foreign policy of the countries involved. This study is expected to contribute valuable insights into the political, economic, and social dynamics of the region, and offer recommendations for resolving issues related to the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea.

4. Literature Review

Research on the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea has attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines, including maritime history, geopolitics, and economics. Existing literature on these regions offers crucial insights into international relations, territorial conflicts, and the importance of these waters in the history of maritime trade and navigation. One of the key sources in this study is *The International Politics of the South China Sea* by T. Huxley. In this book, Huxley discusses in depth the international politics surrounding the South China Sea, focusing on territorial disputes involving China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and other Southeast Asian nations. Huxley highlights the strategic importance of the South China Sea as a major global trade route and a resource-rich area containing valuable oil and gas reserves. The book also examines the geopolitical strategies of countries competing for control over the region and the diplomatic efforts aimed at mitigating tensions among coastal states.

In the context of maritime history, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680, Volume 2: Expansion and Crisis* by Anthony Reid is an invaluable source. Reid explores the economic and maritime trade development in Southeast Asia during that period, with a focus on powerful maritime empires that once ruled the Sulu and Celebes Seas, such as Srivijaya and Majapahit. The book offers a detailed depiction of major trade routes connecting Southeast Asia with India, China, and the Middle East. Reid also discusses how these empires dominated the seas, serving as vital trade centers in the past. Through an in-depth approach, he



explains how the abundance of natural resources and strategic geographical positions played a key role in the economic and political growth of these maritime kingdoms.

Additionally, *The South China Sea Dispute: A Delicate Balance of Power* by M. McKenna provides further perspectives on the geopolitical issues occurring in the South China Sea. McKenna discusses the impact of territorial disputes on international relations and maritime security. The book focuses on shifting power dynamics in the South China Sea, particularly following China's rise as a dominant regional power. McKenna explores the foreign policies of the countries involved in the conflict, as well as the role of external powers such as the United States in maintaining stability and security in the region. This book is crucial in understanding the challenges faced by South China Sea coastal states in the face of intensifying territorial claims.

The Philippines: A Short History by Cesar Adib Majul provides useful historical background on the influence of Filipino kingdoms in the Sulu and Celebes Seas. In this work, Majul examines the historical development of the Philippines in relation to maritime relations in the region, including the influence of Islam and the trade that took place along the Sulu Sea coastline. The book also discusses the social and political dynamics shaped by external influences, particularly from the Arabs, Indians, and Chinese, which in turn affected the relationships among the nations surrounding the Sulu and Celebes Seas. Majul highlights the important role of the Sulu Sea in the maritime history of the Philippines, as well as its connections to other Southeast Asian kingdoms that controlled key maritime trade routes in the region.

In addition, studies on the maritime economy in the region are also strengthened by *Southeast Asia and the Rise of China* by R. L. Lee. This book investigates the impact of China's economic rise on Southeast Asian countries and the waters of the South China Sea, including the Sulu and Celebes Seas. Lee analyzes how China's economic growth influences global trade patterns and maritime security in the region. The book focuses on changes in trade and political relations among countries around the South China Sea, highlighting China's role as a major power seeking to control important trade routes and natural resources in the area. Beyond these books, relevant journal studies such as *Maritime Southeast Asia: Politics and Economy* by Peter Burns provide analysis of the role of the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea in the context of global economics and security. This study underscores how the region is not only important to the countries surrounding the Pacific Ocean, but also to global powers that depend on the natural resources and trade routes passing through the South China Sea. In summary, the literature on the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea offers deep insights into the geopolitical, economic, and maritime historical significance of these regions. The books and articles discussed provide a stronger understanding of the connections between ancient maritime kingdoms, the development of maritime trade, as well as the geopolitical and security challenges faced by the nations along the coasts of these waters.

5. Discussion and Research Findings

This study on the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea presents a wide range of issues and questions highly relevant to the geopolitical, economic, and maritime historical contexts of the region. The central issues raised are closely tied to the strategic importance of these waters in global trade, control over natural resources, and territorial disputes involving coastal states and external powers such as China and the United States. The research aims to identify the key factors contributing to geopolitical tensions in the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea, and to analyze their impact on maritime security and international relations in Southeast Asia. One major issue discussed is the territorial conflict in the South China Sea. As explained by Huxley in *The International Politics of the South China Sea*, overlapping territorial claims involve nations such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei, each asserting sovereignty over parts of these waters. This issue is intensified by the discovery of highly valuable natural resources, such as oil, gas, and marine products, which make the South China Sea a critical zone for both economic and military reasons. The study finds that tensions are escalating due to the economic interests of coastal nations striving to control these resources, coupled with increasingly complex maritime security concerns.

A key finding of this study is the strong historical link between maritime history in the Sulu and Celebes Seas and the development of the global economy. Reid, in *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, emphasizes that the trade routes passing through these seas have long served as vital connections between Southeast Asia, India, China, and the Middle East. The role of maritime kingdoms such as Srivijaya and Majapahit in controlling these routes underscores the importance of these areas in the trade of spices, gold,



and other valuable goods. This discovery highlights how the wealth of natural resources in the region historically shaped the politics and economies of dominant Southeast Asian kingdoms. The study also notes the rapid expansion of external influence—particularly that of China—in recent decades, which has further heightened tensions in the South China Sea. McKenna, in *The South China Sea Dispute: A Delicate Balance of Power*, emphasizes how China's rise as a global power has significantly impacted maritime security in the region. China's construction of artificial islands and expansive territorial claims have provoked conflict with ASEAN countries. These findings show that geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea not only involve coastal states, but also external powers like the United States, which is involved in efforts to maintain stability and security in these waters.

The research also highlights growing maritime security concerns. The tensions in the South China Sea are not only related to territorial control but also to freedom of navigation and the safety of major trade routes. Lee, in *Southeast Asia and the Rise of China*, underscores how the region plays a crucial role in international trade, with more than one-third of global trade passing through the South China Sea. Security threats stemming from increased military presence by major powers in the area have further heightened concerns about the safety of these critical sea lanes. In addition, the study explores the role of the Sulu Sea in the maritime history of the Philippines. Majul, in *The Philippines: A Short History*, explains how the Sulu Sea has long served as a key trade route connecting the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and external regions such as Arabia and China. The Sulu Sea has historically been a hub for the spice trade, marine products, and gold, making it central to the political and economic development of regional kingdoms. This finding offers valuable insight into how these waters have served not only as commercial routes, but also as zones of cultural exchange and political influence among Southeast Asian nations.

The study concludes that the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea are not only vital in terms of maritime history and economic value but also represent a complex geopolitical zone, with numerous states competing for control over natural resources and key trade routes. Tensions in these regions have led to increasingly serious maritime security issues, particularly due to the involvement of major world powers with strategic interests in the South China Sea. Therefore, the research provides a clear picture of the challenges faced by coastal states in addressing territorial disputes and ensuring maritime security. These areas also face major issues that raise concerns not only for regional countries but for global security as well. The key problems include maritime boundary disputes, transnational crime, piracy, and human trafficking, all of which threaten the region's stability and security.

One of the ongoing challenges in the Sulu, Celebes, and South China Seas is the ambiguity of maritime boundaries. Overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea, as discussed by Huxley, trigger tensions among coastal nations such as China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. The lack of clearly defined maritime boundaries creates space for conflict and competition. Although the Sulu and Celebes Seas are not as complex in terms of territorial claims, disagreements between bordering countries often result in diplomatic and economic friction. Moreover, transnational crimes in the region are becoming increasingly severe, with rising cases of smuggling goods and people. The Sulu and Celebes Seas, which link several Southeast Asian countries, have become major routes for the trafficking of illegal goods, including weapons, drugs, and contraband. McKenna notes that the strategic location of these seas—connecting the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and other regional states—makes them vulnerable to cross-border criminal activities. Such smuggling has serious consequences for national security and social stability.

Piracy also remains a significant issue in the Sulu and Celebes Seas. These waters have long been known as piracy hotspots, with numerous incidents of robbery occurring along key trade routes. Reid's research on Southeast Asian maritime history shows that piracy in the region has persisted since ancient times, and despite ongoing efforts to address it, the problem remains. Piracy often occurs in remote and inaccessible waters, making it difficult to combat effectively. The study concludes that addressing piracy in the Sulu and Celebes Seas requires closer cooperation among coastal states to improve maritime surveillance and security. Human trafficking is another growing concern in the Sulu and Celebes Seas. These waters are frequently used as routes for smuggling people, particularly migrants from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Lee notes that many migrants fleeing conflict and poverty are illegally transported to other countries using these sea routes. This activity not only harms the victims but also creates social and security challenges for the nations involved.



To address these issues, concrete measures must be taken by coastal states and international bodies. One crucial step is to strengthen regional cooperation in maritime security. ASEAN has begun acting by establishing the ASEAN Maritime Forum and involving external powers in efforts to resolve maritime security challenges. Huxley emphasizes the importance of regional collaboration to counter piracy, transnational crime, and resource management. Such cooperation includes intelligence sharing, joint training, and continuous maritime patrols to reduce the threat of crime in the Pacific. In addition, enhancing law enforcement and security capabilities in these waters is essential. McKenna stresses that countries like the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia need to strengthen their maritime border control and enforcement mechanisms to combat piracy and cross-border crimes. This could include improving military assets and surveillance technologies such as radar and advanced patrol vessels.

Furthermore, reinforcing international law on maritime security and human rights is critical to combating human trafficking. Countries involved in these illegal activities need to strengthen their monitoring and enforcement mechanisms and improve legislation to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice. In this context, the roles of the United Nations and other agencies such as Interpol are vital in supporting Southeast Asian nations in addressing these issues. In summary, the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea are highly strategic areas facing significant security challenges that require coordinated efforts to resolve boundary disputes, transnational crime, piracy, and human trafficking. This study demonstrates that regional cooperation and the involvement of external powers are key to resolving these issues, alongside more effective maritime law enforcement and security measures. The South China Sea, Sulu Sea, and Celebes Sea constitute three major maritime zones that make up a significant portion of Malaysia's maritime borders. This geostrategic position offers Malaysia substantial opportunities to realize its aspiration of becoming a leading maritime nation. These seas are not only international trade routes but also areas rich in natural resources such as fisheries and hydrocarbons. However, to achieve this goal, Malaysia must strike a balance between economic potential, security, and ecological preservation across all three maritime zones.

The South China Sea, as one of the world's most important shipping routes, offers significant economic opportunities for Malaysia. According to Beckman and Davenport (2018), more than 30% of global trade passes through the South China Sea, making it a regional economic lifeline. Malaysia, with its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea, can leverage this route to expand its maritime logistics and port sectors. Ports such as Port Klang and Tanjung Pelepas can continue to be strengthened as major shipping hubs. At the same time, Malaysia must address challenges such as overlapping claims and geopolitical tensions, which require a cautious diplomatic approach and cooperation with neighboring countries through ASEAN and international forums. The Sulu Sea, on the other hand, plays a crucial role in connecting Malaysia with the Philippines and Indonesia. This area is rich in marine biodiversity and serves as an important passage for traditional maritime communities such as the Bajau Laut. However, security threats such as piracy and smuggling have become major issues in this region. According to Gomez et al. (2021), trilateral cooperation between Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia has proven effective in addressing maritime security issues through joint patrols and information sharing. These efforts not only enhance security but also pave the way for economic development on the east coast of Sabah, particularly in the marine tourism and fisheries sectors.

The Celebes Sea, located south of the Sulu Sea, also presents substantial potential for Malaysia's maritime economic development. The region is renowned for its natural beauty, including the Tun Sakaran Marine Park and Sipadan Island, which attract tourists from around the world. According to Salleh et al. (2020), the marine tourism sector in this area contributes to national income and provides employment opportunities for local communities. In addition, the Celebes Sea contains hydrocarbons that have yet to be fully explored. Exploration must be conducted cautiously to ensure the preservation of the sensitive marine ecosystem. To realize Malaysia's maritime nation agenda, an integrated approach is necessary. This includes strengthening port infrastructure, enhancing maritime security, and conserving marine biodiversity. Malaysia must also invest in maritime education and training to develop a highly skilled workforce. At the regional level, cooperation with neighboring countries through initiatives such as the Coral Triangle Initiative and the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) can bolster Malaysia's position as a maritime leader in Southeast Asia. To support the maritime nation agenda, Malaysia must take proactive steps in the South China Sea by enhancing international cooperation. This includes supporting ASEAN's efforts to resolve disputes peacefully



through the Code of Conduct (COC). At the same time, Malaysia should increase its maritime surveillance and monitoring capabilities to protect its EEZ from intrusions.

In the Sulu Sea, Malaysia must expand community development programs to support local populations such as the Bajau Laut. These programs may include maritime education, skills training, and employment opportunities in the tourism and fisheries sectors. Simultaneously, security infrastructure must be enhanced through the deployment of more sophisticated maritime assets on the east coast of Sabah. In the Celebes Sea, Malaysia should invest in scientific research to identify hydrocarbon resource potential without neglecting environmental conservation. Furthermore, efforts to grow the marine tourism sector must be matched with stricter controls on marine pollution and unsustainable activities. To realize Malaysia's vision of becoming a maritime nation, an integrated approach is needed. This includes improving port infrastructure, boosting maritime security, and protecting marine biodiversity. Malaysia must also invest in maritime education and training to produce a skilled workforce. At the regional level, cooperation with neighboring countries through initiatives such as the Coral Triangle Initiative and the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) can strengthen Malaysia's leadership role in Southeast Asia's maritime sphere. Overall, the South China Sea, Sulu Sea, and Celebes Sea offer great potential to elevate Malaysia as a respected maritime nation. However, the success of this vision depends on Malaysia's ability to manage existing challenges wisely. Through a combination of national and regional efforts, Malaysia can realize this vision by balancing economic development, security, and environmental sustainability.

6. Conclusion

The Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea are highly important and strategic maritime zones, not only for Southeast Asian countries but also in the global context. The importance of these areas should not be underestimated, as they connect several major shipping routes that link the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The South China Sea is one of the busiest trade routes in the world, involving the movement of vast quantities of goods and energy, as well as major investments in natural resource sectors. The Sulu and Celebes Seas play a vital role in relations among countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, with the presence of strategic islands that have long been centers of trade and seafaring. The economic potential of these waters is also immense, particularly in terms of natural resources. The discovery of abundant oil and gas reserves in the South China Sea has made it a focal point for energy exploration efforts. Moreover, this sea is rich in marine resources that contribute significantly to the income and food supply of coastal nations. As outlined by Huxley in *The International Politics of the South China Sea*, nations with access to these waters stand to benefit greatly from fisheries and oil and gas extraction. Hence, this region not only plays a central role in the global economy but also offers immense economic potential for neighboring countries.

However, despite its significance, the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea face various challenges that threaten maritime stability and security. One major challenge is the ongoing territorial disputes, especially in the South China Sea, involving major powers such as China and ASEAN countries. As discussed by McKenna in *The South China Sea Dispute: A Delicate Balance of Power*, tensions arising from overlapping territorial claims not only strain diplomatic relations among regional countries but also raise global concerns over security and freedom of navigation in the area. In addition, cross-border crimes, including piracy, human trafficking, and smuggling of illicit goods, continue to pose persistent problems. The Sulu and Celebes Seas, situated between several countries with porous borders, provide fertile ground for criminal activities that negatively impact the social and economic stability of affected nations.

Another pressing issue is the sustainable management of natural resources. As pressure mounts on natural resources such as oil, gas, and marine products, coastal countries must find ways to ensure the long-term sustainability of these assets. Without prudent management, increased exploration risks damaging marine ecosystems, which could have long-term consequences for marine life and local economies. In this regard, stronger international and regional cooperation is needed to prevent resource exploitation and balance economic interests with environmental sustainability. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that the Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and South China Sea are not only important from economic and geopolitical perspectives but also demand serious attention in terms of maritime security and natural resource sustainability. Coastal states must prioritize closer regional cooperation and adopt diplomatic approaches to resolve territorial disputes. More effective measures to combat cross-border crime and piracy should be implemented, while ensuring the protection of human rights and freedom of navigation. If these challenges can be addressed in an integrated



manner, the Sulu, Celebes, and South China Seas will continue to offer immense benefits to regional and global peace, economic growth, and prosperity.

References

Beckman, R., & Davenport, T. (2018). The South China Sea Disputes: Law, Policy, and Regional Security. London: Routledge.

Burns, P. (2005). "Maritime Southeast Asia: Politics and Economy." Journal of Southeast Asian Studies.

Hayton, B. (2014). The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Huxley, T. (2000). The International Politics of the South China Sea. London: Routledge.

Lee, R. L. (2010). Southeast Asia and the Rise of China. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.

Majul, C. A. (1991). The Philippines: A Short History. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.

McKenna, M. (2002). The South China Sea Dispute: A Delicate Balance of Power. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Reid, A. (1993). Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680, Volume 2: Expansion and Crisis. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gomez, E., Santos, J., & Abdullah, R. (2021). "Maritime Security in the Sulu-Celebes Seas: Challenges and Opportunities." Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 52(3), 123–140.

Salleh, S., Ismail, R., & Yusof, N. (2020). "Marine Tourism in Malaysia: A Case Study of Sipadan and Tun Sakaran Marine Parks." Malaysian Journal of Maritime Affairs, 15(1), 45–60.

Teo, E., & Lim, J. (2015). "Maritime Southeast Asia: Geopolitical Importance and Security Issues." Southeast Asia Studies Journal.



Research in Social Sciences
Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 158-166
2025
DOI: 10.53935/26415305.v8i3.414
Email: ismailrc@ums.edu.my

Copyright:
© 2025 by the author. This article is an open access
article distributed under the terms and conditions of the
Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).