

# News in Focus

A ROUND-UP OF EVENTS WITH POSSIBLE LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SINGAPORE

## 1 Defending Singapore's Territorial Waters

#### **Incursions by Malaysian vessels**

In a media conference on 6 Dec, Minister for Transport Khaw Boon Wan revealed that in the past two weeks there had been 14 incursions by Malaysian Government vessels into Singapore's waters, and three of the vessels were still in Singapore's territory.

He outlined how the incursions stemmed from Malaysia's unilateral decision in October to extend the Johor Bahru port limits into Singapore's territorial waters, a move which Singapore protested. Since 1999, Singapore has been exercising jurisdiction over these waters. Malaysia has never laid claim to these waters or protested our actions there. Now, out of the blue, it is claiming that these waters belong to them. (Refer to timeline below.)

"The intrusions by Malaysian government vessels into Singapore territorial waters... is a serious matter of national interest."

- Minister for Finance Heng Swee Kiat on 9 December 2018

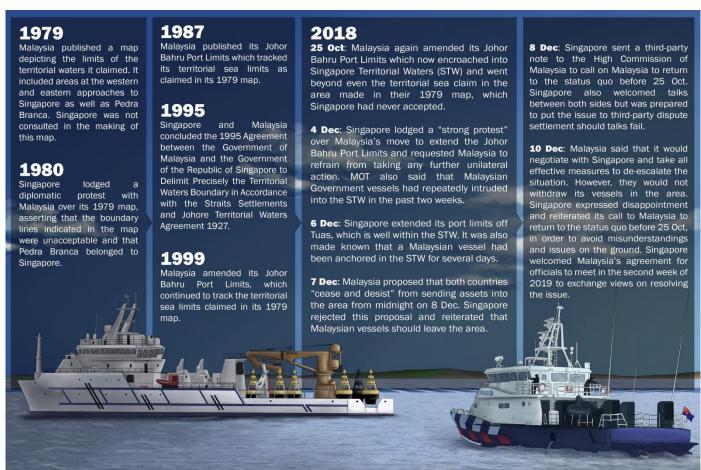
#### Singapore's position: Stay vigilant, resolute and united

Singapore is encouraged by Malaysia's latest statement on 10 Dec that it would take steps to de-escalate the situation and hold talks on resolving the issue, but is disappointed that Malaysia would not withdraw its vessels from Singapore's waters. Singapore sees this as "a blatant provocation and a serious violation of our sovereignty and international law".

As highlighted by Minister for Defence Ng Eng Hen, "our security forces have acted with restraint despite continuing intrusions and provocations". Mr Khaw also emphasised that Singapore cannot allow our sovereignty to be violated and "if it becomes necessary, we will not hesitate to take firm actions against intrusions and unauthorised activities in our waters to protect our territory and sovereignty".

While Singapore will continue to seek close and friendly relations with Malaysia, it is important that we always uphold international law and respect bilateral agreements. When our national interests are challenged, we have to quietly but firmly stand our ground and stay united as one people.

[Sources: CNA, ST & TODAY, 4 –11 Dec; MOT 4 –10 Dec]





"While we seek cooperation and friendship with other countries, we must never let other countries take advantage of us. When our national interests are challenged, we have to quietly but firmly stand our ground and stay united as one people."

- Minister for Transport Khaw Boon Wan at a media conference on 6 December 2018

#### Singapore-Malaysia airspace dispute: Not about sovereignty, but air safety

On 4 Dec, Malaysia's Transport Minister Anthony Loke said that Malaysia wanted to reclaim the airspace over southern Johor which had been delegated to Singapore since 1974, citing concerns over sovereignty and national interest.

In response, Singapore's Ministry of Transport issued a statement pointing out that "international law is clear that cross-border airspace is not incompatible with sovereignty".

In 1973, Malaysia, Singapore and other regional states agreed on arrangements to ensure efficient air traffic flows into, out of and overflying Singapore.

These arrangements were subsequently approved by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) and operationalised through a bilateral agreement with Malaysia in 1974.

Under these arrangements, the provision of air traffic services over southern Johor was delegated to Singapore. Such arrangements have been working well for both Singapore and Malaysia, and have facilitated air traffic growth within an airspace that is one of the most complex in the world.

To minimise impact on airlines and passengers, consultations would be required for any proposed changes.

Speaking to reporters on 4 Dec, Mr Khaw reiterated that airspace management has nothing to do with sovereignty. In fact, many countries have parts of their airspace managed by other countries.

He also added that ICAO procedures and processes indicate that any change must improve status quo.

"If it doesn't, what is the point of changing? The criteria for improvement are safety and efficiency. Does it make it safer? Does it make it more efficient? Otherwise, why change?"

[Sources: MOT, 4 Dec; CNA, 4 – 6 Dec]

### 2 Ukraine-Russia Clash at Sea

In another development far from our shores on 25 Nov, Russian border guards fired at and seized three Ukrainian navy boats in the waters off Crimea, claiming that they had illegally entered Russian territorial waters.

All 24 Ukrainian soldiers on board, including several injured from the clash, were captured and kept under Russian detention to await trial.

The Russian attack happened despite a bilateral treaty between the two countries giving them access to the Sea of Azov, which borders Ukraine and Russia and is linked by the Kerch Strait to the Black

This treaty did not detail the specific "dotted line" boundaries of each country's limits in this area. The coordinates released subsequently by both Ukrainian and Russian authorities verified that the Russian attack happened in international waters near the Kerch Strait

On 6 Dec, at a meeting of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE),

Ukraine said that the recent seizure of their naval vessels and crew represented another assault by Russia on international law and urged OSCE ministers to increase sanctions against Russia. In return, Russia accused Ukraine of orchestrating the clash.

The US, Canadian and European ministers dismissed Russia's version of events and pledged their full support for Ukraine, demanding the immediate release of the detained soldiers.

[Sources: TODAY, 25 Nov; ST & CNA, 26 Nov; BBC, 30 Nov; CNA, 7 Dec]