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One Ocean Connects All

By BA Hamzah

SYNOPSIS

War in the Black Sea or the Taiwan Strait will imperil humanity's health and survival because all seas and oceans are interconnected, and we depend on every one of them for oxygen, food, livelihood, and peaceful coexistence.

COMMENTARY

MEDIA REPORTS suggest a war could break out anytime – by accident or by design – in the South China Sea where China has seven small offshore artificial islands which double-up as military installations or basing facilities equipped with runways and jetties. A war could also break out in the Taiwan Strait where China has been accused of wanting to close it to international navigation or in the Sea of Japan, where North Korea has been firing its short-range ballistic missiles.

An attack on Taiwan and the surrounding seas will disrupt global trade. China, South Korea, and Japan contribute 25% of global exports. Millions of innocent people will be killed and displaced. Unlike the displaced Ukrainians who found temporary and permanent homes in Europe, United States and Israel, these people would probably perish at sea, like the thousands of Vietnamese boat people who tried to escape the war with the United States.

Shockwaves from the Black Sea

A war at sea, anywhere, will further imperil the health of our oceans that feed us, regulate our climate, and generate most of the oxygen we breathe in. The life and the ecosystem in the oceans are already under severe stress from the growing threats from man-made activities such as marine pollution, habitat destruction, sea-level rise, acidification, invasive species, overfishing, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU), and destruction to the food chain in the sea.

Piracy, robbery, lawlessness, and terrorism, besides pollution, are an additional menace to the global wellbeing at sea. More than 40% of the oceans has been severely affected by pollution “and no area has been left untouched by human activities” which take the sea for granted, treating it as dumping ground for human and industrial waste.

A war has already broken out, initiated by Russia, in the Sea of Azov and Black Sea between Russian and Ukrainian forces since February 2022; however, it is a continuation of the events of 2014, when Russia annexed a vast portion of eastern Ukraine and occupied the Crimea Peninsula.

While no one knows for certain the extent of damage to the sea when the Russian destroyer Moskva sank in the Black Sea, off the coast of Ukraine, in April 2022. For sure, over time, the shock waves, chemicals, and debris from the Black Sea will be transported by currents to other oceans.

The sea water from the oceans is circulated and replaced by a natural circulation process known to scientists as the global ocean conveyor. The currents at sea are like rivers on land. They move massive amounts of water containing nutrients, oxygen, rubbish, non-biodegradable plastics, and tyres, for example, from one ocean to another.

The currents also transport all the rubbish and pollutants from one sea into other seas resulting in major health hazards for mankind that depends on the ocean for food, oxygen, fish, fresh water, and minerals including the hydrocarbon resources that sustain the industrial societies.

Only One Ocean on Earth

People familiar with underwater explosions have observed when an explosion happens at sea the shockwaves from the blast can travel many miles underwater. The shock waves will cause harm to sea creatures. In certain cases, the damaged battle ships, for example, will release chemical waste and toxins into the water and impact the fragile marine biodiversity.

Scientists have also raised alarms on the deleterious impact of detonating unexploded bombs left over during the world wars at sea, for example, on the seabed in UK waters on the life of whales, dolphins, and other marine life.

The fact is our universe has only one sprawling ocean – an interconnected body of flowing water. This single continuous body of water comprises 71% of planet Earth. It is estimated that the ocean absorbs 50% more carbon dioxide than our atmosphere.

Scientists believe the vital and fragile ecosystems such as mangroves, seagrasses and salt marshes could help the world store more than 1.4 billion tonnes of carbon emissions a year by 2050 if “they are protected and restored”. The challenge is to protect and restore it in pristine condition.

Scientists have long acknowledged that coral reefs help protect coastlines from storms and erosion, and they form important habitats for some types of fish, and a source of

medicines. Unfortunately, the productivity of marine life, for example, has been marred by reckless activities including pollution – 90% of which comes from land-based sources.

Humanity's Reliance on the Sea

Human civilisation has benefited immensely from both living and non-living resources in the sea. More than 26% of oil and gas, which power the industrial societies, for example, come from the sea. Silver, gold, copper, manganese, cobalt, and zinc are found in large quantities on the seabed of the high sea.

These minerals were up for grabs by the industrial states had it not been for UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that established the International Seabed Authority to oversee the exploitation of these resources for the benefit of mankind.

The sea that transports more than 90% of international trade, which in turn helps to facilitate the integration of global economy is the driving force behind globalisation. International trade holds the key to global economic growth.

For all its contribution to human civilisation, we have made very little efforts to work together to improve the state of the ocean's health. Any form of war at sea will undermine our life-support system. A war in the South China Sea, for example, is a war on humanity.

Mankind needs the sea to survive. Most scientists, however, believe that if humans become extinct, the sea won't even notice we're gone!

Control the Sea to Rule the World

Today, the US has a visible presence in all oceans of the world. Washington wields and flexes military and political power via the sea. This explains why China is competing against the US in maritime zones such as the South China Seas, East China Sea, and South Pacific.

English adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618) wrote that "whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself."

Raleigh's philosophy dominated the strategic thinking in Europe and the US for a long time. The early maritime powers included Spain, Portugal, Holland, and Great Britain. They had controlled the sea for power projection.

This logic appears to be the rationale for the behaviour of a few countries in 2022.

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