

Compulsory pilotage in Torres Strait approved

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I REFER to the article, 'A threat to transit passage?' (ST, Dec 8).

Contrary to Associate Professor Robert Beckman's claims, Australia's system of compulsory pilotage in the Torres Strait is neither a threat to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos), nor a dangerous precedent that runs counter to the interests of maritime states such as Singapore.

Compulsory pilotage in the Torres Strait has been introduced to address very real concerns that Australia has - to protect the sensitive marine environment of the strait, to improve safety of navigation in narrow and treacherous waters, and to ensure clear routes for ship-borne trade through the strait.

A vessel that transits the strait without a pilot creates an unacceptable risk of running aground - impeding the passage of other vessels and causing potential long-term damage to the marine environment and its resources.

Australia is an original signatory of Unclos and takes its international legal responsibilities seriously. Contrary to what was stated in the article, Unclos is silent on the question of whether a coastal state can introduce compulsory pilotage in an international strait. Accordingly, the subject falls to the competent organisation - the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).

The United Nations Division of Oceans Affairs and Law of the Sea has confirmed that Unclos 'defers to the IMO on navigational rules, regulations and standards'.

The IMO has approved Australia's system of compulsory pilotage.

It is therefore a serious misrepresentation of the facts to accuse Australia of a 'prima facie breach' of Unclos.

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