The Strait of Malacca : Maritime Terrorism and Security Challenges

Commander Shishir Upadhyaya

INTRODUCTION

The recent removal of the Strait of Malacca from the list of areas deemed dangerous to shipping by the Joint War Committee (JWC) of the Lloyd's Market Association, London and subsequent news announcements that the straits are now free of piracy and other threats, should be viewed with scepticism. While the acts of piracy and armed attacks on ships transiting the straits have declined significantly (from 38 in 2004 to 12 in 2005 and to 03 up to Oct 2006) meriting removal from the JWC list, the threat of maritime terrorism has in no way reduced.

The Global War on Terrorism unleashed by the USA post 11 September 2001, led to a stifling of land based terrorist activities worldwide. It is no coincidence that no audacious terror attack of the magnitude of the 11 September 2001 incident has occurred in the USA ever since. The recent uncovering of the terrorist plot to blow up trans-Atlantic flights from Heathrow airport is an example of how international cooperation in counter terrorism is paying off. Unfortunately, such coordinated efforts have not yet been made in the maritime arena. Unless urgent steps are taken to provide a coordinated approach to tackle maritime threats, the next major terror attack could well be at sea.

MARITIME TERROR HOTSPOT

Criminal and terrorist groups have always been attracted to the sea, for a variety of activities ranging from acts of trans-national crimes such as smuggling of drugs, weapons, human trafficking, piracy, to acts of maritime terrorism such as attacking ships as in the case of United States Ship (USS) *Cole* and French tanker MV *Limburg*. Use of the sea for terrorist activities can be broadly classified as maritime terrorism while other criminal activities can be broadly classified as maritime trans-national crimes. While there

Commander Shishir Upadhyaya has a Masters Degree in telecommunications. He did the Defence Services Staff College Course in 2005.

may not be dedicated maritime terrorist organisations in the world there are several criminal groups involved in trans-national crimes such as smuggling, piracy, etc. The link between the two is but natural. It can thus be presumed that the pirates of today will be the maritime terrorists of tomorrow. By the same token the hotspots for piracy and other maritime crimes could be the potential regions for maritime terrorism.

Threat Analysis of the South East Asian Region

The South East Asian region has two of the world's busiest shipping lanes. The first running from the Strait of Malacca across the Indian Ocean to Middle East and the other from the South China Sea to the Sea of Japan; the former having the highest density of shipping. Over 60,000 ships transit the Strait of Malacca annually, transporting 66 per cent of the world's oil, 50 per cent of global container traffic and a third of its bulk cargo.

According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) during 2005 out of 208 piracy incidents globally, 101 were reported in South East Asia alone. While it may be argued that these figures include both minor acts of robbery as well as piracy, the IMB data shows a pattern in which South East Asia clearly emerges as a hotspot for maritime crimes in the world. Some of the world's largest and busiest ports such as Singapore, and Jakarata are located in this region. At its narrowest point the Strait of Malacca is only 1.5 nm wide. With increase in shipping density, vessels would have to navigate at slower speeds, thus, making them increasingly vulnerable to attacks.

The world's leading terrorist organisations such as the Al Qaeda, Jammat Islamiyah (JI), Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Abu Sayaff are known to be operating in the region. Al Qaeda was responsible for the attack on USS *Cole* in October 2000 and the French Tanker MV *Limburg* in October 2002. The Al Qaeda is known to have members with marine background in its cadres. A case involving armed pirates trying to practice ship handling on a Tanker transiting the straits was reported in 2003. Some analysts view this as akin to the 11 September 2001 hijackers taking flying lessons five years prior to the incident.

The Strait of Malacca is the artery connecting economies of Asia and Europe with the Middle East. Needless to say the threat of maritime terrorism is high in this region. A terrorist strike in the

straits could be in various forms. Some likely scenarios are as follows:-

    (a) Sinking or scuttling of a ship at a choke point.

    (b) Deliberate collision in narrow straits.

    (c) Exploding a Light Natural Gas carrier in port.

    (d) Terror attacks in mega ports.

    (e) Smuggling of nuclear bomb or biological weapons through containers into ports.

In the worst case scenario a terrorist attack rendering the Strait of Malacca unusable, would entail ships being diverted by nearly a thousand miles or an additional three days of steaming. The resultant impact will be a ripple effect starting with heightened oil prices coupled with increased freight and insurance charges, and so on, leading to incalculable losses on the industrial production of countries like Japan, China, etc.; eventually affecting the rest of the global economy.

ONGOING SECURITY INITIATIVES

A large number of unilateral, bilateral and multilateral initiatives in combating maritime threats in the region have been taken by the regional countries. The efforts by Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia to secure the straits are commendable. Some important initiatives are discussed in succeeding paragraphs.

Malacca Strait Security Accord (MSSA)

Under the Malacca Strait Security Accord, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have established the Malacca Straits Security Patrols as well as 'Eyes in the Sky', aerial patrols. A radar network along the strait is also being established to provide a complete radar picture of the straits.

Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships (ReCAAP).

Another important initiative in this direction is the ReCAAP, initiated by Japan in 2004 to promote multilateral anti piracy cooperation. The agreement came into force in September 2006. Under the agreement the ASEAN 10 as well as Japan, India,

China, Korea, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have agreed to cooperate in information sharing, mutual capacity building and combined operations. Indonesia and Malaysia have not yet ratified the agreement though they have agreed to cooperate on ground. Under the ReCAAP an Information Sharing Centre (ISC) has been established at Singapore. Broadly, the role of the ISC would be to carry out an analysis of various transnational crimes including piracy in the region with a view to provide the security agencies with operational intelligence to combat maritime threats.

International Ship and Port Security Code (ISPS)

The ISPS code has significantly reduced cases of armed robberies and piracy globally as well as in this region. The Automatic Identification System (AIS) established under the ISPS code for vessels above 300 tons has aided in safe navigation and monitoring of the ships. The greatest benefit to the shipping community from ISPS code has been increased security awareness on the part of the mariners.

Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI)

Notwithstanding the reluctance of the regional countries seeking direct foreign participation in security patrols in the straits, the United States Navy (USN) has maintained its presence in the region under the RMSI. It conducts several bilateral and multilateral exercises such as the annual Coordinated Afloat Readiness and Training Exercise (CARAT) with regional countries aimed at combined maritime security operations. This is part of the US strategy of capacity building of regional countries.

Five Power Defence Agreement (FPDA)

The FPDA between the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore is another multilateral initiative in maritime security. The scope of the FPDA has changed over the years from air defence of Singapore and Malaysia to disaster relief and humanitarian aid and now maritime terrorism. Under the FPDA an annual exercise dealing with maritime security is conducted in the region regularly.

The above initiatives in securing the straits have ensured a drastic reduction in maritime crimes in the region. However, the challenge now remains in the ability to maintain this tempo and

further expand and synergise regional and global cooperation towards combating maritime terrorism. The maritime terrorism around the Strait of Malacca simply can't be tackled by Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia by themselves.

CHALLENGES

Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)

A complete MDA of the region is paramount to the security of the region. This would involve a myriad of inputs ranging from AIS data, radar inputs, shipping information, etc. Under the ISPS all vessels above 300 tons can be automatically tracked. However, a major drawback of the AIS is that vessels below 300 tons are not included in the system. This is because the system is primarily designed for navigational safety and not maritime security. Unorganised traffic comprising vessels below 300 tons which includes fishing boats, ferries etc., abound in the straits. These vassels have a huge potential for use in terror attacks. It may be recalled that both the USS *Cole* and the French Tanker MV *Limburg* were struck by small boats. Small vessels have been used since World War II to strike at bigger targets.

Lack of information pertaining to small craft is a major challenge in the security of the strait. The first step in securing the straits would be to keep track of every ship or craft in water. There are broadly two ways of achieving this. The first would be by adopting technical means. An example is the Harbour Transponder System (HARTS) being developed by Singapore for tracking of all small craft. The second method would be by establishing an information sharing network.

Information Sharing Network

Inputs obtained from Radar and AIS need to be supplemented by human intelligence and technological intelligence. This is one area where information sharing arrangements with other partners is essential. A common protocol for information sharing between members needs to be established to provide a near real time MDA. The establishment of the Information Sharing Centre under ReCAAP at Singapore is a step in the right direction. However, the non-ratification of the ReCAAP by two major regional players-Malaysia and Indonesia-highlights a regional divide in the strategy for combating maritime threats in the region. Thus synergised efforts

towards achieving a singular MDA picture which is vital for the security of the region remain unachieved. The need of the hour is total commitment by all members of the ReCAAP to share information towards building complete MDA of the region.

Funding

The tri-lateral Malacca Strait Security Accord is largely funded by three major players i.e., Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia with contributions made by IMO and shipping companies. Australia, Japan and the USA have also contributed to various programmes in terms of funding and material assistance. However, in order to maintain the current tempo there is a need to institutionalise contributions from the main users and stakeholders i.e., ship owners. This can be achieved by imposing a toll for vessels passing though the strait. The removal of the Strait of Malacca from the JWC list implies a saving up to € 4000.00 per ship. A part of this saving could be imposed as toll towards ensuring security.

Foreign Assistance

The Increased security patrols since 2005 when the strait was put on the JWC list have resulted in drastic reduction in piracy in the region but has stretched to capacity the limited maritime resources of the regional countries. In order to sustain this tempo and enhance surveillance through high end technology, it is imperative that direct involvement of major players such as the USN, the Indian Navy, the Royal Australian Navy etc. be sought.

So far the issue of foreign participation in the security patrols has been persistently discouraged by most of the regional countries. The sensitivities of regional countries against foreign participation could stem from their historical experiences of the late 17th and early 18th century when the Royal Navy was involved in combating piracy in the Strait of Malacca. This eventually led to the colonisation of the region.

It is opined that active participation by foreign navies in security patrols will not only ensure timely intelligence inputs from diverse sources but presence of additional patrols will provide a boost to the security in the region.

CONCLUSION

Stifling of terrorist activities on land is likely to lead to an increase in maritime terrorism. Terrorist groups have time and again demonstrated vulnerability of transportation systems by striking at trains, hijacking of aeroplanes etc. Predictably the next targets could be ships.

Unless rapid and proactive steps are taken to achieve a total synergy amongst various navies and security agencies fighting maritime terrorism, the Strait of Malacca could become the next target of maritime terrorism.

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(i) IC–58153P Maj Shailendra Singh Arya
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— First Prize-Gold Medal and cash award of Rs 10,000/- Entry accepted for publication in the USI Journal.

(ii) 05288T Lt Ashwath Mythreya, IN
NDA Khadakvasla, Pune
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