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Australia's New Maritime Security Strategy

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National security was a key theme in the run up to this year's federal election in Australia, with both Labour and the Liberals pledging to step up security, in particular along Australia's coastlines. Labour outlined a A\$300 million regional maritime anti-terror plan that included the creation of an Australian Coast Guard, whilst the Howard government proposed a series of new maritime security measures, worth A\$102 million dollars over four years.

With the Howard government's landslide election win, we will now see the implementation of this maritime security plan, as part of the government's National Security Strategy. The new measures include:

- increasing the rate of container inspection in Australia's major ports by 25 percent. This increase will result in approximately 100,000 containers being x-rayed every year;
- customs officers boarding more vessels arriving at their first Australian port;
- increasing the Customs closed circuit television network from 32 ports to 63 ports;
- posting specialist immigration officials at ports to assist with border control;
- amending the Migration Act to allow for more checks on cruise ship passengers;
- introducing a maritime security identification card for maritime industry employees;
- reviewing the current security provisions in place in Australia's offshore oil and gas facilities and
- strengthening intelligence collection and the provision of intelligence information at Australia's major ports.

But will it be enough?

On the Second anniversary of the October 2002 Bali attack that shook Southeast Asia, we are reminded that the threat of international terrorism still casts its shadow over the region. Despite recent arrests, the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network remains resilient and is expected to strike again. The recent suicide bombing of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta on 9 September 2004, which killed nine people and injured more than 180, is certainly proof of this.

JI has planned attacks against naval vessels in the region. In late 2001 JI had planned to target American military vessels at Changi Naval Base. However these plans had to be put on hold as the Singapore JI members lacked the operational capacity to launch the attack. Renewed fears of a JI attack against maritime targets came after US Intelligence passed on warnings about a plot to hijack a vessel in the SLOCs, or sea lines of communication, of the region.

The warnings, issued in September 2004, stated that activists from JI have been discussing plans to seize a vessel using local pirates.

Other terrorist attacks attributed to JI are:

- The Christmas Eve bombings of churches in Indonesia in 2000, which killed 19 people.
- The 12 October 2002 Bali suicide attack in a nightclub that killed nearly 200 people; mostly Western tourists including 88 Australians.
- The Marriott Hotel bombing in Jakarta on 5 August 2003 that killed 12 people.

The Philippines continues to be a haven for terrorist activity, with mounting evidence of terrorist training camps on the Philippine island of Mindanao and growing cooperation between JI and the two Philippine Muslim insurgency groups -- the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

Both the MILF and ASG have carried out previous maritime terrorist attacks. One such attack by MILF took place on a busy seaport in Davao City, in the Philippines, in April 2003. 17 people were killed in the attack. The group has also carried out attacks on Philippine shipping, mainly placing bombs on domestic inter-island ferries being used to transport members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and Christians to and from Mindanao. On 27 February 2004, ASG carried out a suicide bombing on the M/V Superferry 14 shortly after it left Manila Bay, killing more than 100 people. This attack resulted in the greatest number of deaths since the Bali bombing,

These groups have therefore shown both their interest in targeting maritime infrastructure and/or their desire to target Australian interests.

Over 40 percent of Australia's sea trade passes through the narrow waterways of the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagos. In the year 2000-01, 3200 ships entered Australia from overseas, making more than 9600 calls at Australia's ports. More than 100,000 travellers arrive at Sydney Port alone each year.

The Australian Government pursues a policy of decreasing the Australian-flagged coastal fleet in favour of cheaper flags of convenience shipping. Flags of convenience vessels are registered in countries such as Panama or Liberia to avoid heavy taxes and stringent inspections. Foreign ships now carry about 98 percent of Australia's international trade.

These factors leave Australia's maritime sector particularly vulnerable to terrorists who have demonstrated their skill and dedication, and willingness to sacrifice lives to achieve their aims.

What more can be done?

Australia needs to engage in, and promote cooperation, at the regional level. It needs to work with the countries of Southeast Asia to help develop and strengthen their capabilities to fight terrorism. According to Sam Bateman, a retired commodore of the Australian Navy, there is "a lack of trained maritime police, inadequate boats and equipment, and inexperience with complicated concepts of law enforcement such as the doctrine of hot pursuit". This is particularly a problem in Indonesia.

In July this year, the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (ISPS Code) entered

into force. It requires ships and ports to adopt a number of new security measures. However, the main problems with the new security measures are the lack of enforcement and a set and agreed minimum standards which these measures have to meet. These problems are particularly significant in states which have on their shipping registers flags of convenience vessels. It has been noted that these states 'lack the resources or people with sufficient expertise to enforce the standards that are acceptable to the shipping community at large'. Australia's increased use of flags of convenience vessels and the potential risk to maritime security that this poses needs to be addressed.

Howard's earlier pledge that he will not hesitate to launch pre-emptive strikes in other countries in order to prevent terrorism at home has tended to alienate Australia from its regional neighbours. In his first press conference since his re-election, Howard promised to build stronger ties with Asia. This is a step in the right direction, but the need to move beyond mere rhetoric is important. Signs that significant security cooperation may be on the cards came with the announcement that Canberra hopes to have a new agreement with Indonesia covering defence co-operation, anti-terrorism and police operations.

The maritime industry is vital to the Australian economy. The 'hardening' of security surrounding land targets following 9/11 means that the 'soft underbelly' of the maritime industry is now, by default, one of the new targets of this global terror. It should not be neglected. Although Howard's new maritime security strategy will go some way to reducing the vulnerabilities of Australia's maritime sector, the threat itself will remain.

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