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Maritime Air Patrols The New Weapon Against Piracy in the Malacca Straits

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MALAYSIA'S Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, Najib Tun Razak, first proposed the idea of conducting multinational maritime air-patrols over the Malacca Straits at the Shangri-La Dialogue in early June this year. His proposal was met with enthusiasm by both the littoral states as well as Thailand, which has agreed to participate in the flights. Indeed, the maritime air patrols, also known as the "Eyes in the Sky" initiative (EiS), has been implemented at a breathtaking pace to deal with the problem of piracy as well as other transnational criminal activities at sea. Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia launched their maiden patrol on 13 September, with Thailand first acting as an observer before participating in the air patrols. The speed with which the maritime air patrols were implemented reflects the genuine commitment of the littoral states in forging a regional maritime security regime. In this new arrangement, the ASEAN members take the driver's seat to enforce the rules on cooperation and enforcement.

Operationally, the Malaysia-Singapore-Indonesia (Malsindo) and EiS patrols are two key components that form the Malacca Straits Security Initiative (MSSI). The air patrols are intended to achieve maritime domain awareness while the naval patrols are to physically secure and defend that domain. Both will form the 'first phase' in enhancing the safety and security of the Straits by the three littoral states. The 'second phase' will mark the prospect of other states and stakeholders playing a contributory role -- at least for the EiS. However, based on the lukewarm responses to the first phase, a lot of work is still needed before phase II can get off the ground. For example, during Exercise Bersama Lima, the multinational naval exercise involving the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) countries conducted in mid-September, the navy chiefs of Australia and New Zealand were hesitant to commit aircraft to the EiS. They only stated that they were willing to contribute their expertise and experience in conducting maritime air patrols. This despite the fact that the Royal Australian Air Force routinely fly their P3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft out of Butterworth as part of the Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) of the FPDA.

Getting Down to Brass Tacks

Operationally, the littoral states plus Thailand will each contribute two maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) sorties per week for the EiS. The MPAs would be allowed to fly above the waters of the states in question no less than three nautical miles from land. Each aircraft will have a Combined Maritime Patrol Team (CMPT) on board, comprising a military officer from each of the participating states. As a team, the CMPT will establish a comprehensive

surface picture over the patrol area. The CMPT will broadcast any suspicious contacts on designated radio frequencies to ground-based agencies - called the Monitoring and Action Agencies (MAAs) – established in each of the participating countries. Depending on whose territorial waters the incident takes place in, the respective MAAs will have to activate the patrol assets within their existing national decision-making structure to undertake the required follow-on actions.

The Response Chain

Despite the best of intentions, the entire ‘response chain’ of the MSSI may have to be drastically improved before the littoral countries can officially say that they have a 24-7 surveillance and interdiction capability over the Malacca Straits. The response chain can be conceptualised in three parts: detection, identification, and interdiction.

The *detection* process itself already presents a problem because of the lack of hi-tech equipment being used on the maritime patrol aircraft as well as the large area that needs to be covered. Take for example the surveillance radar capability of the three littoral countries. It is unclear whether the motorboats normally used by pirates will be easy to spot and identify. Such craft also generate relatively small heat signatures and physical profiles that can fall below the threshold of all but the most sophisticated of radar and optical identification systems. Reports suggest that some of the littoral states have started collaboration with Dutch and European firms to purchase enhanced radar systems capable of identifying small wooden fishing vessels up to a 20-kilometre range.

The area of operations is also too large for the current number of aircraft sorties to cover in any meaningful way. For example, the RSAF’s Fokker 50 MPA has a top search speed of 200 knots and a flight endurance of eight hours. The fastest time that the aircraft can survey the entire 960-kilometre straits is about two and a half hours at best. As such, real time gaps will exist in the sea situation picture. It is estimated that for a complete 24/7 coverage, at least 10 daily sorties, or 70 sorties per week are required. This is in contrast to the 8 weekly sorties that are assigned to the EiS at present.

The second weakness in the response chain is in *identification* and *interdiction*. Even if the maritime patrol aircraft were able to detect a suspicious boat, it would be difficult for it to gauge the intentions of the boat. For example, if a suspicious craft is approaching or going alongside another ship, how can you tell if its activities are going to be benign or not? The crew of the two boats could well know each other. The only way is for patrol craft to conduct the investigation on the water. However, only 17 craft are currently assigned under Malsindo, and each craft can only patrol within its own respective territorial waters. It is estimated that at least 24 boats are required on a 24/7 basis to cover the entire Malacca Straits.

Conclusion

The momentum of the EiS as well as that of Malsindo must be sustained. The implementation of the second phase of EiS, which involves participation by the extra-regional countries, should be done soon, especially since the littoral countries themselves lack the resources to comprehensively undertake the task of securing the entire Malacca Straits. However, before phase II can even be considered, the requirement to have a multinational crew onboard the maritime patrol aircraft should be reviewed as it would hamper the operational effectiveness of the team onboard and limit participation.

Furthermore, there needs to be recognition that surveillance, or detection, only forms one part of the 'response chain'. A drastic improvement in the entire 'response chain' may have to be undertaken if the MSSSI is to be at all effective. Capability gaps in any element of the chain, be it in the detection, identification or interdiction aspects, will render the entire MSSSI ineffective. In particular, there is a need to address the issue of the oft-heard lament of the littoral states over the lack of patrol boats to conduct the task. One way is to pool patrol boat resources through the creation of Joint Patrol Zones that do not prejudice the respective claims of boundary delimitation -- a concern which has prevented the progress towards a joint activity. Such zones are meant for operational use and is consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Ideally, of course, the claimants should of their own accord resolve all boundary delimitations before the conduct of any joint effort to reduce operational ambiguity.

An examination of new concepts such as the Joint Patrol Zones, and the resolution of the delimitation of national boundaries, may have to be undertaken with renewed pace. Failure to do so may put the littoral states at the mercy of the international community. This was evidenced in July when the Lloyd's Joint War Committee (JWC), responsible for highlighting geographical areas that hull and machinery insurers should look out for when underwriting risks, declared the Malacca Straits a war risk area. Such a declaration by an influential international body is simply bad for business.

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