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Scaling Rising Tides; A Three-Pronged Approach to Safeguard Malacca Straits

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It would not be an overstatement to say that the safety of the Straits of Malacca and Singapore is almost indispensable for the growth of the Asian economies. Almost 55,000 ships carrying more than a third of the world's tonnage and half of the world's oil shipment passes through the Straits. Due to the changed strategic environment in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, the stakes are particularly high for two communities of states. Firstly, the three littoral states - Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and even Thailand, a close neighbour, because of the threat to the economic benefits it brings, threat of pollution and the possible risk of attacks on onshore facilities. Secondly, the user states, especially Japan, China and South Korea, which are dependent on the Malacca Straits for the uninterrupted and efficient transit of cargo, especially energy supplies.

Japan and South Korea import 80 percent and almost 100 percent of their oil needs respectively, with most of it passing through the Malacca Straits. Also, China's bulk of oil imports pass through the Malacca straits which is only expected to grow in the future. President Hu Jiantao of China highlighted this concern when he said that the "Malacca-dilemma" is the key to China's energy security and any vulnerability will be a threat to China.

This demonstrates that both littoral states and user states have a critical interest in ensuring the safety of navigation in the Malacca Straits thus requiring an inclusive approach to the future management of the straits.

Safety of Navigation- The Three Pronged Approach

With the growing significance of the Straits of Malacca, a three pronged approach would be necessary to safeguard one of the most important sea lanes in the world. The three littoral states, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore have the most crucial role to play in securing the strait.

First and foremost would be sprucing up the littoral state's internal security arrangements. The various internal security enforcement agencies like the marine police, coast guards and the navy tend to work in a silo like environment. Hence, more coordination could be induced by centralising some of the intelligence and information sharing amongst these agencies.

A better networking mechanism should be worked out through a central database which could be maintained where information and intelligence from these agencies could be

collated. Other local stake holders like the ship operators, ship owners, shipping companies and even research institutions, think tanks and expert intelligentsia should be encouraged to contribute their understanding and research on the issues. Their feedbacks would help in further calibrating and fine-tuning these internal arrangements.

Secondly, to combat mishaps various regional and multilateral counter measures have started to take form under various forums like the ARF, ASEAN+3 etc. One such measure is the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Anti-Piracy (ReCAAP). ReCAAP is a Japanese initiative for anti-piracy cooperation amongst the ASEAN countries, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh which was concluded in Tokyo in November 2004.

A mainstay of the ReCAAP Agreement is the Information Sharing Centre (ISC), which will be an international organisation located in Singapore. The ISC will facilitate communication and information exchanges between the member countries. It would improve the quality of statistics and reports on piracy and armed robbery against ships in the region, thus producing better policy decisions.

One of the important endeavours of the ReCAAP Agreement is also to hone the capabilities of member countries to combat piracy. In the current post 9\11 scenario, such a platform would be very crucial in bringing the information from various government agencies under one organisation. This will provide insights about methods and means of tackling the piracy menace in an appropriate and sophisticated approach. Till date only 4 (Japan, Laos, Cambodia, and Singapore) out of the 16 countries have currently acceded to the ISC initiative, which requires a minimum 10 to endorse before it can be setup. Keeping the significance in mind more countries should accede to the formation of the ISC and do it without delay.

The third of the triadic approach would be improving the technical cooperation and aids to navigation in and around the straits. This aspect despite being most important still remains one of the most neglected issues in the strait. The Tripartite Technical Experts Group (TTEG) on the Safety of Navigation in the Malacca and Singapore Strait has been able to make many achievements over the years, including a vessel routing system in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore.

Another initiative under the TTEG is the Marine Electronic Highway (MEH). MEH is an innovative marine information and infrastructure system. It integrates environmental management and protection systems and maritime safety technologies for enhanced maritime services. It incorporates higher navigational safety standards, integrated marine environment protection and sustainable development of coastal and marine resources.

The aids to navigation within the Indonesian Waters are reported to be unreliable. They are said to be either missing, unlit or out of position. Owing to the dangerous status of the Indonesian waters it should make earnest efforts to improve these Aids to navigation. It can seek higher collaboration with the Malacca Straits Council which already funds almost three-fifth of the costs incurred on aids to navigation in the straits.

Other organisations like the International Association of Marine Aids to Navigation and Lighthouse (IALA), which is a non-profit making international technical association can be involved in such initiatives. IALA has been engaged in working towards a common effort to

harmonize aids to navigation worldwide and to ensure that the movements of vessels are safe, expeditious and cost effective and at the same time protect the environment. It has partnered with the IMO in coordinating the responses to the recent tsunami that devastated some of the Asian coasts.

IMO led Institutionalisation

The international shipping community is confronted with growing challenges as a result of the exponential increase in shipping through the straits as well as the new threat of catastrophic terrorism. There is a need for a new architecture facilitating cooperative arrangements involving the littoral states and the user states. One approach could be the institutionalisation of the IMO-sponsored meeting on the Straits of Malacca and Singapore involving all interested parties. Institutionalisation would ensure that the stakeholders have a “collective interest” in preserving the straits as a safe sea line of communication, whatever their respective rationale might be. Institutions are better equipped to “create rules” and to promote international norms that would facilitate cooperation. A proper institutional setup could help in creating a consensus for burden sharing. An IMO-sponsored institution would not only make information sharing easier but also reduce the costs and time involved in negotiating various issues individually between states.

Conclusion

A comprehensive approach will enhance cooperation within and amongst the littoral states and promotes coordination with the international community. Initiatives like the ReCAAP and MEH surely make the sea lane safer to sail. It will buttress the commitment of user states to meet the costs of upgrading the capabilities of the littoral states. It will galvanise ground level cooperation between the naval, coast guard and marine police capabilities, providing nimble and better response to piracy and the maritime terrorism. In the long term, regional frameworks and institutionalisation helps in better enforcement and maintenance of these consensus led initiatives in a structured manner. It ensures the accoutrement of better safety and navigational aids and the establishment of state-of-the-art electronic information systems.

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