



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (86/2005)

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## **Managing the Peace-conflict Continuum: A Coast Guard for Singapore?**

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THE security of regional sea lanes has been a topic of keen discussion in many regional maritime security forums. The regional sea lanes link countries in Asia to markets around the world and bring to Asian countries the energy resources and other goods necessary for their economies. In particular, the Malacca and Singapore Straits are among the world's most important shipping routes due to the high volume of shipping passing through the Straits as well as the proportion of global trade and energy resources carried. Any serious disruption to maritime traffic through the Straits would have a widespread and far-reaching detrimental effect.

The littoral states of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have recognised the importance of the strategic nature of the Straits and have been cooperating for some time now. Indeed, functional cooperation is good between all three littoral countries bordering the Malacca Straits. The Police Coast Guard of Singapore, the Malaysian Marine Police and the Marine Police of the Riau region have met regularly for exchanges. The navies of the three countries have also exercised regularly, albeit more on a bilateral and not multilateral basis. As a result of long established relations between the three navies, bilateral operating procedures are in place and a degree of inter-operability have been developed at the tactical level. The ease in which maritime security issues such as the interdiction and recovery of rogue vessels, the enhancement of surveillance abilities, and data sharing between participating navies, could be included in recent bilateral naval exercises between the three countries serve to highlight the level of confidence developed between units at the tactical level.

This functional proficiency at the tactical level is also poised for further improvement as the exercises begin to move from a bilateral mode to a multilateral one. For example, the trilateral coordinated patrols (MALSINDO) between the three countries started in July 04 and there has also been the recent "Eye in the Sky" (EiS) initiative involving Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. Moreover, the three littoral states are part of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), a grouping of 22 navies in the Western Pacific. The WPNS has just conducted a multilateral maritime security sea exercise in May this year where participating navies were required to share surveillance information via a locally developed data link unit embarked upon participating ships.

### **Different Structural Approaches to Maritime Security**

Whilst functional cooperation between the three navies and law enforcement agencies are currently good, the challenge to further cooperation will arise from the different approaches

each country has taken to tackle the issue of maritime security, especially that posed by transnational threats.

With regard to Malaysia, it has decided to centralise all agencies dealing with maritime affairs in peacetime into the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA). Formed in November, the MMEA, which is akin to the U.S. Coast Guard, is charged with maintaining law and order, preserving peace, safety and security, preventing and detecting crime, apprehending and prosecuting offenders and collecting security intelligence. The MMEA is to perform these tasks within the Malaysian Maritime Zone. The MMEA, however, will come under the command and control of the Malaysian Armed Forces in times of emergency, special crisis or war.

In contrast, Indonesia has opted to decentralise much of its policing functions from the central government to the provinces. For example, the Navy is now no longer the sole agency responsible for maritime security. Provinces have authority up to 12 nm of sea whilst the regencies have responsibility for up to 3 nm of sea. Furthermore, in line with the goal of decentralisation, the Armed Forces have recently been placed under the Minister for Defence while the Police Force has been put under the Minister for Home Affairs. Such an action diffuses power even further as both the police and military were one entity under the previous regime.

Singapore on the other hand has adopted a coordinating approach to the issue of maritime security. Each of the maritime agencies are responsible for their respective professional areas while the Maritime Security Task Force is charged with coordinating the activities of the three agencies while also looking into further ways of enhancing maritime security and promoting Singapore's broader maritime interests.

The Maritime and Port Authority (MPA) is tasked to regulate the port industry in Singapore to ensure its competitiveness and also to oversee the implementation of security measures mandated by the International Maritime Organisation. The MPA is also tasked with handling civilian emergencies like oil or chemical spills from tankers transitting the Singapore Straits. The Police Coast Guard maintains physical security within the Singapore's territorial waters and the Republic of Singapore Navy oversees the seaward defence of Singapore and the sea lanes. Increasingly, as the formation of ASSET teams is indicative of, the Navy is being assigned constabulary duties like the boarding of selected ships within Singapore waters to prevent hijacking.

Although the functional cooperation between the navies of the three littoral countries is excellent at the tactical level, this level of proficiency is not fully extended to the operational level. With Malaysia adopting a centralised approach, Indonesia a decentralised approach and Singapore a coordinating approach, the different decision-making structure adopted by the three littoral countries is a key contributor to the lack of operational efficiency.

The incompatibility of command and control organisations makes it difficult to achieve proficiency at the operational level and impedes performance when it comes to both the decision-making and interdiction phase of the response chain.

### **A Coast Guard for Singapore?**

Is there a case for the formation of a coast guard in Singapore? It would appear much could

be gained by synergising the three maritime elements of the Maritime and Port Authority, Police Coast Guard and Republic of Singapore Navy. This new entity would perform all policing functions as well as the function of seaward defence and the security of the sea lanes. Such an agency will improve the speed of response and also house all expertise within one agency.

Singapore could emulate the Norwegian example, where the Coast Guard is an integrated part of the Norwegian Armed Forces and is under the military chain of command. Although under the military chain of command, the Norwegian Coast Guard has, through the Coast Guard Act, civilian police authority. As a result of the Act, the Norwegian Coast Guard, besides defending the sovereignty of Norway, also enforces civilian acts on behalf of the primary authority. With this arrangement, the Norwegians have benefited tremendously as there is a cross-flow of people from the Navy to the Coast Guard and *vice versa*. Navy officers gain by being exposed to the spectrum of activities of both peace and low conflict scenarios while Coast Guard officers profit from experience gleaned from being a combination of military officer, civilian authority and police officer. The experience of managing low-level contingencies is important to naval officers as they will have to manage the transition to war phase appropriately for any miscalculation could lead to inadvertent war.

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