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Network Centric Management of Maritime Security

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THE establishment of routine patrols by the maritime security organisations of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore in the Straits of Malacca is a welcome development for the continued economic development of the region. However, cooperation continues to lag, perhaps due to lingering hangover of regional suspicion. This is further hampered by the cross-cutting of organisational responsibilities and differing levels of authority within regional naval, police, and coast guard organisations. Despite this complex picture, the threshold of willing cooperation seems to have been crossed. Until regularised routines and effective interoperability are established, the question of what can be done to ensure effective patrols lingers over the agreement.

Network Centric Management in the Persian Gulf

An effective model already exists for integrating disparate nations with common strategic goals but differing operational policies and widely varying levels of technical interoperability. Since January of 2002, a "coalition of the willing" led a maritime interdiction effort in the Persian Gulf and surrounding waters to both enforce UN sanctions against the Hussein-led Iraqi government and to ensure that Al-Qaeda leadership did not try to escape to Afghanistan posing as economic migrants to Oman, Bahrain, and other regional states. In this effort, the concept of network centric warfare played a critical role in ensuring the success of this mission.

The coalition enforcing the regional interdiction operations was largely composed of NATO navies sharing a long history of cooperation at sea. However, despite this history, the navies that made up the interdiction force brought widely differing levels of technological interoperability with them. On the high end, navies from the US, Britain, and Canada carried highly integrated and sophisticated communication and networking suites. However, ships from Greece and Italy also participated in the operations and were less well equipped. Japanese ships occasionally contributed to the development of the "maritime picture" despite having no ability to interoperate tactically, operationally, or even at a strategic level.

Complicating the technical aspects of the operation was the fact of widely differing levels of strategic policies amongst the participating nations. Nations like France, which contributed a nuclear submarine on a periodic basis to the interdiction effort, actively led opposition to US policy. Even nations ostensibly closer to US policy goals brought highly restrictive rules of engagement that limited their ability to stop and board ships transiting the operational area.

Yet despite challenges at every level of warfare, the interdiction operation was an enormous success. Several Al Qaeda leadership targets were apprehended and Iraq was unsuccessful in running the blockade. The establishment of a robust coalition network to transfer information amongst partners was a critical aspect of this outcome. Run largely by the Canadian navy, the network was successful from two important perspectives. The Canadian navy has pursued what it terms "gateway C4ISR" since 1991 when it ran the coalition naval logistics operation in the Persian Gulf during Desert Storm. As a result, Canadian ships are able to communicate and send data to ships with the best and worst levels of technical interconnectivity. This asset served the coalition well in the Gulf during these most recent operations as well. While US secure networks were off limits to all coalition partners, and coalition secure networks, initially, could only be accessed by British, Australian, and Canadian ships, the Canadian gateway capabilities ensured that a high quality maritime picture reached even the most technically challenged partner.

Learning from the Persian Gulf

Managing this data is absolutely crucial in a littoral environment. The Persian Gulf shares many characteristics with the Malacca straits. It is a high density shipping environment with overlapping legal claims and large numbers of small boats plying traditional fishing and local trading. On any given day in the Gulf, navies monitoring the interdiction effort managed over 6000 contacts including more than 150 merchant vessels, 100 Dhows, and 30 small boat contacts. The maritime picture that must be managed by an interdiction operation is extremely complex as such and is complicated by the relative scarcity of available enforcement assets (MALSINDO – Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia – patrols cope with similar challenges with only 17 ships). Having access to information is crucial to effective use of these assets.

The second key to success in the Gulf was the construction of a coalition database that tracked the movements of all traffic that transited the region and kept track of which ships that had been boarded. This was important for a variety of reasons. First, it permitted an assessment of the effectiveness of the interdiction effort, which built confidence on the part of participating coalition nations. Second, it enabled the rational assignment of scarce assets and ensured that ships were not boarded multiple times on a single transit. This established local confidence in the professionalism of the interdiction force and, in turn, helped to ensure compliance on the part of local merchantmen, fishing vessels, and the small boats carrying economic migrants.

A final aspect of the coalition interdiction operations was the effective management of differing rules of engagement. These ranged from the highly robust rules carried by American and Canadian ships to the extraordinarily restrictive ones used by the Japanese. The range of the rules of engagement was managed on a spreadsheet by coalition commanders, permitting them to establish the range of actions any individual ships were capable of in very specific situations. Again, this enabled the rational assignment of resources and maintained a high degree of coalition cohesion. Ship captains were never placed in awkward positions, having to refuse commands from the coalition commander due to political restrictions. At the same time, the spreadsheet built up a high degree of transparency in terms of why ships were assigned the missions they were.

These are early days for the growing maritime security regime established by the Eyes in the Skies and MALSINDO initiatives. Regional maritime security organisations still have a long

way to go before effective security is established definitively in the Malacca strait. Despite this, there is much that can be accomplished by overseeing organisations that will not jeopardise the sovereignty or interests of the partner nations.

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