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Redefining the Limits of the Straits: A Composite Malacca Straits Security System

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The Chiefs of the Defence Forces from Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia signed an agreement to formalise the Malacca Straits Coordinated Patrol Network on 21 April 2006. The agreement brings under one umbrella both the MALSINDO surface patrols and the Eye in the Sky (EiS) air surveillance arrangements by the littoral states to ensure the security of the straits.

A Joint Coordinating Committee has also been set up to oversee the agreement, which is expected to improve operational integration between the three security forces. The importance of the Straits, which links the Indian and Pacific Oceans through the South China Sea to world trade is well known. Vast quantities of oil, coal, iron ore and minerals are shipped to the manufacturing centres of South-east and North-east Asia, while millions of containers flow in the opposite direction to feed consumer markets all over the world. As the latest statistics show, 63,000 ships, carrying one quarter of the world's commerce and half the world's oil pass through the Straits of Malacca and Singapore annually.

Threats to shipping in the Malacca Straits primarily emanate from piracy and trans-national crime. Some analysts have also projected the possibility of maritime terrorism. This raises considerable global concern since any disruption to the flow of maritime traffic through this channel would seriously affect world economy. Any external military participation has long been opposed by the littoral states who consider any such move to be a violation of their sovereignty.

The Malacca Straits as a Composite System

The littorals -- Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore -- have however initiated coordinated surface and air patrols. As a result, piracy attacks have dropped to 12 in 2005, down from 38 the previous year, as reported by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB). The 'EiS' air patrols that followed the MALSINDO surface patrols initiative, expanded the scope of security in the Malacca Straits. Firstly the Singapore Straits was incorporated, thus including the southern approaches. Secondly, the addition of Thailand expanded participation. The significant feature of the new agreement is the invitation to Thailand to join the joint surface patrols, 'in order to secure the northern approaches to the Straits'. Thus the need to view the problem from a larger perspective has been recognised. The Batam Joint Statement issued after the 4th Tripartite Ministerial Meeting in August 2005 also recognised the 'importance of engaging the states bordering the funnels leading to the Straits of Malacca and Singapore'. However, to effectively secure the northern approaches, it must be appreciated that the

majority of the traffic entering or exiting the Straits of Malacca passes through the “Six degree Channel”, bordered by Indonesia and India, thus inclusion of the latter country in any security arrangement is essential for its success.

Rationalising the Limits of the Straits

By definition, a strait is a passage connecting two larger bodies of water, in this context the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Thus logically, the Malacca Straits should be viewed in conjunction with the approaches to both these water bodies. Current perspectives on the Malacca Straits’ limits appear to be based on the International Hydrographic Organisation’s 1953 publication of S-23 entitled “Limits of Oceans and Seas”. This publication is published primarily for use by National Hydrographic Offices to ensure uniformity and avoid overlaps. It clearly states that “the limits used have no legal or political significance whatsoever”. To ensure effective security management, it is only as a composite system that any security measures would be successful. Thus, to tackle the security of the straits holistically, the eastern limits of the Singapore Straits should define one end and the “Six degree Channel” the other end of a composite Malacca Security System.

Restricting security measures to the Malacca Straits alone ignores the absence of physical boundaries in the maritime domain. The illegal non-state actors responsible for the problem being trans-national, neither recognise nor respect maritime boundaries. Mounting pressure due to enhanced security in one portion of the straits could merely compel them to relocate to safe havens in adjacent areas, whilst retaining the ability to return for attacks when they choose.

Rationalization of the entire straits area into one composite system by including both approaches is thus essential to facilitate the adoption of comprehensive security measures. The northern portion of this composite system is large, measuring over 150 nautical miles across -- too large to be monitored using coastal radar alone. Effective surveillance requires sufficiency of aerial assets coupled with an adequate surface response capability. To this end, the inclusion of both Thailand and India as littoral states would provide the needed boost to regional maritime capacity.

Indian Strategic Concerns

The Indian Andaman and Nicobar chain is an archipelago of 572 islands, only 38 of which are inhabited. The southern tip of these islands, Indira Point, is only 165 kilometers from Sumatra, being separated by the "Six Degree Channel". In fact, this proximity makes India as much a part of Southeast Asia as that of South Asia. Their remote location and sparse habitation make them vulnerable to illegal activities such as piracy, poaching, arms and drug trafficking or even maritime terrorism. The large volume of shipping passing through the islands increases the threat of environmental damage to their fragile ecology. Upgrading the security structure in these islands to an integrated command in 2001 was undertaken to meet these specific challenges. Over 40% of India’s rapidly growing trade passes through the Malacca Straits, giving it a major interest in securing the safety of shipping through this vital international waterway. Inclusion in its security would therefore be in India’s national interest.

Prospects for Indian Participation

In 2001, on a United States request, Indian warships provided escort to high-value US ships

involved in Operation Enduring Freedom, whilst they transited the Malacca Straits. All littoral states had been informed earlier, however, some concerns were subsequently raised. Thereafter, India's stand has been that despite considerable stakes in the security of the Malacca Straits, any material contribution to the efforts would only be subject to an invitation from the littorals. India recently signed the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), a 2004 Japanese initiative for piracy-related information sharing on in the region. The commitment to contribute to Straits security is thus unambiguous; any reticence would appear to be to give due respect to the sensitivities of the littorals. Should a way be found to enable participation as a littoral of a larger Malacca Straits Security System, India would not be found wanting.

In the meantime, bilateral agreements have seen the Indian Navy undertaking coordinated patrolling along its maritime boundary with Indonesia since 2001, and with Thailand since 2005. Annual exercises with the Republic of Singapore Navy and regular Passage Exercises (PASSEXes) with most regional navies, have been undertaken. Hence interoperability is established. Maritime surface and aviation assets based in the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) could secure the northern end of the Malacca Security System jointly with Indonesia and Thailand. In addition, should the need arise; these could always be augmented at short notice by mainland forces.

Conclusion

Despite commendable regional efforts, securing the vital Malacca Straits lifeline on a sustained basis is likely to be limited both by maritime capacities and the inability to view the problem from a larger perspective. Ensuring effective security entails maritime domain awareness coupled with a credible response capability. Littoral states presently have a limited capability for this task. At the same time, regional sensitivities preclude participation by outside states. Extending the boundaries of the Straits System to include both the northern and southern approaches is a logical approach. Therefore, comprehensive security could be ensured only by the inclusion of both India and Thailand as bonafide littorals of a redefined Malacca Straits Security System.

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