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Safety and Security in the Malacca and Singapore Straits

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SHIPPING security in the Malacca and Singapore Straits has been much in the news during the past year. Due mainly to the existence of separatist groups and the high incidence of piracy in Southeast Asia, many observers believe that these strategically important waterways are at risk from a maritime terrorist attack. This situation has had unsatisfactory outcomes for the region, most notably the declaration by Lloyds of London that the Malacca Strait is a high war risk area for insurance purposes. This has meant increased insurance premiums for many vessels using the Straits.

The 'low probability, high impact scenario' of a maritime terrorist attack has figured prominently in some assessments of security in the Straits. It attracts attention because of post-9/11 heightened awareness of the terrorist threat, especially against transportation systems, and the possible economic consequences of a disruption of shipping traffic. However, the more fundamental issue is the safety of shipping in the Malacca and Singapore Straits in all its dimensions, embracing issues of security and environmental protection, as well as ones of safety.

An Agenda for Action

A new policy study on *Safety and Security in the Malacca and Singapore Straits: An Agenda for Action* was released in Singapore on 23rd May 2006 by the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS). It is based on a comprehensive analysis of piracy and armed attacks against ships in the Straits over the last ten years conducted by the Maritime Security Programme at IDSS. Using this analysis and an appreciation of other issues and requirements, the new study includes a 21-Point Action Plan.

The study builds on the significant measures already identified at the 2005 Shangri-La Dialogue; at the Tripartite Ministerial Meeting of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore held in Batam in August 2005; and at the meeting on the Safety, Security and Environmental Protection in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore convened by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the Indonesian Government in Jakarta in September 2005. These three events were significant milestones, which have led to new cooperative momentum that the study seeks to maintain.

The stakeholders in safety and security in the Straits include the governments of both the littoral countries and the user states, international and regional organizations, and the private sector, particularly the ship owners. The new study focuses on the need for cooperation, and

on the measures that might be introduced to provide an effective regime for safety, security and environmental protection in the Straits. It also addresses issues such as jurisdiction, the threat of maritime terrorism, the risks to passenger ferries, and highlights the need for the accurate analysis of piracy and armed robbery against ships.

A Comprehensive Approach

The IDSS study and its action plan are based on the understanding that there is a close relationship between maritime safety and maritime security. Operational measures to provide security at sea invariably have collateral benefits for safety at sea - and vice versa. It is inefficient, for example, to have cooperative arrangements in place for security at sea (e.g. anti-piracy patrols), which do not also cover other operational requirements, such as search and rescue operations and the management of major pollution incidents.

A clear distinction existed in the past between maritime safety and maritime security. The IMO focused on ship safety while security was a responsibility of security agencies. However, this traditional split has given way to a growing realization that a close inter-relationship exists between maritime safety and maritime security. Maritime safety is now an integral part of maritime security. It also includes consideration of marine environmental protection and of other types of illegal activity at sea, such as trafficking in arms, drugs or people, as well as piracy and maritime terrorism.

A Cooperative Approach

A cooperative approach to security, safety and environmental protection in the Straits is required that recognises the interests of all stakeholders. The IMO meeting in Jakarta last year agreed that a mechanism be established to provide for regular meetings between littoral and user states, the shipping industry, and others with an interest in safe navigation through the Straits. These stakeholders have different interests, priorities, threat perceptions and expectations. The IMO meeting process, which began with the Jakarta Meeting, offers potential for regular dialogue between stakeholders on security, safety and environmental protection in the Straits.

The countries adjacent to the Straits face a heavy financial burden in providing safety, security and environmental protection services in the Straits. This is an accident of their geographical location. The services required include patrols and surveillance by ships and aircraft to prevent illegal activity, search and rescue coordination centres, navigational aids, hydrographic surveys, and pollution clean up arrangements. However, a satisfactory mechanism has not been developed yet for sharing the financial burden of these services with the countries which make use of the Straits.

Threats to Shipping

Some types of ship are more likely to be attacked than others. Balanced assessments of risk require that the ships most at risk, and those not at risk, be identified. This requires a detailed appreciation of the pattern of shipping traffic, and of the types of vessel, using the Straits, as well as of the modus operandi of pirates and sea robbers. While the greater amount of trade through the Straits, by both value and volume, is carried in large, mainline tankers, LNG carriers, container ships and vehicle carriers on passage between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the majority of attacks are on smaller, more vulnerable vessels employed in local

trades. These small ships also figure prominently in recent incidents of hijacking or the kidnapping of crew members for ransom.

There are implications of this analysis for assessments of the threat of maritime terrorism. For example, it is possible to conclude that due to the relative vulnerability of smaller and slower vessels, the greatest threat to a port might in fact come from small LPG or chemical tankers rather than the larger vessels, which tend to attract the most security attention at present.

With the notable exception of the attempted attack on the cruise liner *Seabourn Spirit* off Somalia in November 2005, acts of piracy against passenger vessels, both cruise liners and ferries, have been rare. While maritime security experts believe that these ships do not make good targets because they have many people onboard and are not easy to board, nevertheless they are vulnerable to the placing of bombs onboard. The problem is not so much the actual explosion but the fire and panic that invariably follow. Managing such an incident would be highly demanding for local authorities and would require close cooperation between the littoral states.

Way Ahead

The new study from IDSS addresses measures for cooperation between the littoral states and non-littoral countries that do not infringe on the sovereignty of the littoral states. These might range from exercises, training and support, including with information sharing and developing situational awareness, through to an operational role at sea, including both patrolling and escorting high value targets.

The study and its 21-Point Action Plan constitute the first major attempt at bringing together all the concerns of safety, security and environmental protection in the Straits, as well as the interests of all stakeholders. Much of the recent attention of the main user states has been on security, particularly the threats of piracy and terrorist attack, and they have only paid lip service to other requirements, including marine environmental protection, safety, and other forms of illegal activity at sea. While the user states continue to press their concerns strongly, there is a pressing need for the littoral states to identify and prioritize all their needs with regard to providing safety, security and environmental protection in the Straits.

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