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PIRACY IN THE GULF OF ADEN: LESSONS FROM THE MALACCA STRAIT

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Piracy in the Gulf of Aden has reached a level serious enough for the international community to take concerted action. However, the response has largely been more international in nature than regional and national. This contrasts with the measures taken in the Malacca and Singapore Straits in response to the same development.

PIRACY in the Gulf of Aden has reached a level serious enough that the international community has responded with major countries sending ships to patrol the waters in the region. The huge ransoms demanded and the audacity of the attacks required the international community to secure an international sea lane. There is a parallel between what is happening in the western end of the Indian Ocean -- the Gulf of Aden in particular -- and what used to be the situation in the eastern part of the Indian Ocean, the Malacca and Singapore Straits.

Both waters are home to busy international sea lanes. Up to 20,000 vessels transit the Gulf of Aden annually whilst about 70,000 transit the Malacca and Singapore Straits. The Malacca and Singapore Straits used to have a high level of piracy and armed robbery as well from 2000 to 2004 based on figures reported by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB).

However, the responses to the situation are different in the two areas. In the case of the Malacca and Singapore Straits, indigenous and regional measures have been adopted at the national, bilateral and multilateral levels, with the international community throwing in its support. In contrast, the responses in the Gulf of Aden have primarily been from the international community. Somalia, the country in the Horn of Africa which is the main source of the piracy problem and a failing state, is not in the position to crack down on perpetrators from its territory.

National Measures

The littoral countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have all taken steps at the national level to

address the issue of piracy and armed robbery.

The Indonesian Navy has reformed its operations and is modernizing itself to increase effective patrols against illegal activities. Indonesia has also set up command centres and emplaced special forces that can respond to piracy; the shipping community has also been given contact details of the command centres. The United States is also assisting Indonesia in building a string of coastal radar along the Malacca and Makassar Straits. These are hard security measures. In addition, Indonesia has also focused on alleviating the poverty and bolstering people's welfare in remote areas, especially those that border the key sea lanes.

The Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) has also built a string of radar stations along the Straits of Malacca to monitor traffic. It has also acquired new patrol boats. Special anti-piracy task forces have been set up and vulnerable vessels like tugs and barges are protected. The RMN has also intensified its training activities and patrols in the piracy-prone areas to increase its presence. Another important measure adopted was the formation of the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), the equivalent of a coast guard, which was set up in November 2005. It brings together the different agencies involved in maritime security under one command.

Singapore has also implemented a range of measures to step up maritime security. These include an integrated surveillance and information network for tracking and investigating suspicious movements; increased Naval and Coast Guard patrols; random escorts of high-value merchant vessels; boarding of selected merchant ships; and the re-designation of shipping routes to minimize the convergence of small craft with high-risk merchant vessels.

Bilateral Measures

There have been efforts at bilateral cooperation as well. There are bilateral patrols between Indonesia and Singapore with direct communication links between their navies and the sharing of radar picture. There are also coordinated patrols between Indonesia and Malaysia conducted together with other maritime institutions of the two countries, such as customs and police forces. Malaysia and Thailand have also increased the intensity of their cooperative maritime patrols in the northern portion of the straits.

Besides the three littoral states, other regional countries have also become involved in the security of the Strait of Malacca. For example, the Indian and Indonesian navies have conducted joint patrols in the northern Malacca Strait and the US has conducted anti-piracy exercises with Indonesia involving the boarding and inspection of shipping. Japan has also contributed to capacity building of the regional countries with the Japan Coast Guard having conducted training exercises in the region. Japan has also accepted students from the region to its Coast Guard academy. In addition, the Nippon Foundation has contributed patrol boats to both Indonesia and Malaysia.

Multilateral Measures

In comparison to the bilateral cooperation that exists in Southeast Asia, the multilateral response to piracy has been limited in scope and is only starting to take shape. At the 10th ASEAN Regional Forum Post-Ministerial Conference held in Cambodia in June 2003, ARF participants expressed their commitment to becoming parties to the SUA Convention and its protocol. However, in reality, to date, only half of ASEAN have signed the convention. Significantly, the key littoral countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have not.

At a November 2004 meeting in Tokyo, 14 nations from the ASEAN + 3 forum plus India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh agreed to the setting up of an Information Sharing Center (ISC) in Singapore under the aegis of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against

Ships in Asia (ReCAAP). The ISC was launched on 29 November 2006 and maintains a database of piracy-related information; facilitates communication between national agencies; and critically analyses the issue of piracy based on information made available through government agencies. A web-based Information Network System (IFN) has also been developed to support the exchange of information between ISC and ReCAAP member countries.

Besides the exchange of information, there has also been a deployment of law enforcement assets by regional countries. The Malacca Strait Patrols comprises sea and air patrols as well as a coordinating committee, known as the Joint Coordinating Committee (JCC), between the countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. There is also an Information Exchange Group (IEG) comprising the naval intelligence agencies of the participating countries and a joint Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) has been developed.

The three littoral countries have also developed the Malacca Strait Patrol Information System (MSP-IS) which is a data sharing system that allows users to share information about shipping to boost security in the Malacca Strait.

Lesson from the Malacca and Singapore Straits: Go Local

In conclusion, it would appear that only an international response has been adopted to address the issue of rampant piracy in the Gulf of Aden. A national and regional response has yet to fully emerge. Unless the capacities of the regional countries can be improved to deal with the issue, the effectiveness of the international maritime force present will likely be short-term, costly and limited.

The international community should therefore examine the indigenous actions that are needed and facilitate those actions as they are more likely to succeed in the long term, are more robust and more cost effective. That is the lesson that the regional countries bordering the Malacca and Singapore Straits have learnt in their fight against piracy and armed robbery.

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