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THE MALACCA STRAIT: WILL IT CONTINUE TO BE SAFE?

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10 March 2010

The Republic of Singapore Navy issued an unprecedented advisory last week for shipping to improve security measures while transiting the Malacca Strait. It shows the continued need for vigilance despite the many security measures implemented so far.

IN THE EARLY hours of 4 March 2010, the Republic of Singapore Navy issued an unprecedented advisory, warning of a possible terrorist attack in the Malacca Strait. The RSN's Information Fusion Centre (IFC) sent out an alert for shipping to improve security measures while transiting the Strait. The advisory warned of the possibility of a terrorist group planning attacks on oil tankers and also other large vessels with dangerous cargo passing through the Strait. Without identifying the group, the advisory also mentioned the likely mode of attack -- the use of smaller vessels like dinghies, speedboats or even small fishing vessels like sampans.

The timing of the advisory was a surprise because of the perception that the Malacca Strait is currently a safe international passage due to the slew of security measures by the littoral states since 2004. These include coordinated air and sea patrols, intelligence sharing and operational coordination between the regional navies as well as the setting up of the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ISC) in November 2006. ReCAAP is the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia.

New Areas of Vulnerability

An examination of the recent ISC annual report for 2009 reveals new areas of vulnerability. The data indicate a shifting of attacks from the northern part of the Malacca Strait to the Singapore Strait and the southern part of the South China Sea. The number of attacks in the South China Sea in 2009 has increased five-fold over 2005 levels, with the attacks mainly occurring off Pulau Damar and Pulau Mangkai in the vicinity of Indonesia's Natuna Islands. Given the number of measures that have already been implemented by the littoral states, what more can be done to improve security and

prevent a possible terrorist attack on shipping, especially in the new areas where ships are vulnerable?

Conduct of Joint Patrols in Existing and New Areas

The first possible move is to conduct joint patrols in existing and new areas. The current arrangements for the Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP) only requires that each country patrols its respective territorial waters. But given the length of the coastline and the limited number of ships available to the littoral states, there is a need to pool available assets and jointly patrol the more vulnerable areas. As the South China Sea has been highlighted as a new area of vulnerability, it might also be necessary to extend the patrols to the southern part of the South China Sea.

Setting up a Regional Operations and Intelligence Centre

Secondly, there is a need for greater sharing of information and a single point of contact for ships traversing the Malacca and Singapore Straits. Currently, ships report their positions to the Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) in Port Klang in Peninsular Malaysia when they transit the Malacca Strait and then to the Port Operations Control Centre (POCC) in Singapore when they transit the Singapore Strait. The ships are no longer monitored when they transit the South China Sea. It is necessary to have a single point of contact in the Malacca and Singapore Straits to which the ships report their positional information to and are tracked and to have that reporting continued when the ship transits the South China Sea. This regional centre could be located either in Malaysia or Singapore. The RSN's Information Fusion Centre (IFC) is uniquely suited for this role.

If ships are to be monitored on a near real-time basis, it would be good if data from the Automatic Identification System (AIS) – a coastal tracking system -- can be shared between the littoral states or if AIS transmissions are tracked using low orbiting satellites. The littoral states might also consider the setting up of a regional Long Range Identification and Tracking (LRIT) Centre to collect positional data of shipping at longer ranges. This centre could be co-located with existing information sharing or fusion centres. With new sources of information and the use of analytical tools and databases, the regional centre could in future provide timely and perhaps even real time warning and response to ships plying regional waters.

Regional Arrangements for Small Craft Transponders

Thirdly, there should be better monitoring of potential threats like small craft. Currently, amongst the littoral states, only Singapore has mandated that ships below 300 gross tonnes be fitted with a transponder system to monitor their positions within Singapore's waters. The littoral states might want to consider a regional arrangement where such transponders are installed on all small boats and for this information to be shared to allow for better monitoring of potential threats.

Use of Armed Guards Onboard Ships

Lastly, there may be a need for legislation to allow armed guards onboard. The situation in Somalia has shown that with a large area of operations, it would be impossible even for an international naval coalition to be present throughout. The Somali pirates have also shown that when a group is determined enough, passive measures currently practised are not sufficient to prevent a boarding. The record has shown that none of the ships that have embarked armed guards have been hijacked. There is a need to consider new national legislation to allow armed guards onboard ships and to govern their usage. The marine insurance industry would also need to be consulted as they may not extend cover to an armed crew. However, the insurance industry can be persuaded as integrated insurance and security solutions have been marketed since last year in response to the situation off Somalia. An example is the "Hart Swinglehurst-Protected Gulf of Aden Transits", which have been marketed since December 2008.

Making the Malacca Strait Safe

The RSN advisory has shown that security cannot be taken for granted. Even when security measures have been implemented, it is still possible for terrorist groups to try targeting ships once a weakness has been identified in the regional security arrangement. Hence, there is a need for regional countries to pool together their resources, share information in a more intense manner and integrate their actions to stay ahead. The consequences of not doing so may be unimaginable.

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