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The Malacca Strait Patrols: Finding Common Ground

By Koh Swee Lean Collin

Synopsis

A decade has passed since the Malacca Strait Patrols were launched as a holistic initiative in April 2006 following the initial MALSINDO trilateral coordinated patrols in July 2004. Some useful lessons can be drawn as Southeast Asian littoral states conceive of possible ways forward in promoting regional cooperation in maritime security.

Commentary

THE MALACCA Strait has always been crucial to the international community. Ensuring its security is not without challenges when littoral states straddling this waterway have differing views of foreign involvement. While Singapore felt that all users ought to contribute to the strait security, Indonesia and Malaysia viewed it as the littoral states' sole responsibility.

However, such differences were not prominent in the 1990s since bilateral frameworks, such as the Indonesia-Singapore Coordinated Patrols, sufficed to tackle the prevailing piracy and sea robbery threats then – until the upsurge of attacks in the early-2000s. Following that the shipping industry called for “internationalising” Malacca Strait security under United Nations mandate. Direct external intervention appeared imminent after Washington proposed the Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI), which envisaged US policing of the strait in 2004.

The Bigger Picture

Kuala Lumpur later became wary of the media highlighting of intra-regional differences, which it feared would beset interstate ties. Instead, Malaysian Foreign

Minister Syed Hamid Albar called for thinking of “a bigger picture” as littoral states strive to collectively secure the strait.

It was around the same time that Indonesian Navy Chief Admiral Bernard Kent Sondakh proposed a trilateral framework building on existing forms of bilateral cooperation. Remarking on good cooperation Indonesia had with Malaysia and Singapore, he said if the task force was established, “automatically security in the Malacca Strait will be strengthened.” Both Malaysia and Singapore backed this initiative.

In late June 2004, the three countries agreed to establish MALSINDO, the initial plan being joint patrols but was watered down to a less ambitious, coordinated patrol format taking into account mutual respect for national sovereignty. In July 2004, MALSINDO was inaugurated.

Initial Setbacks

But the following months did not augur well for MALSINDO. Following an attack on Japanese-owned tugboat *Idaten* in March 2005, Tokyo proposed to dispatch the Japan Coast Guard to help police the strait – which Kuala Lumpur rejected.

More ominously, those intra-regional differences threatened to rear their heads again when Singapore opined that all stakeholders should contribute to Malacca Strait security.

Fortuitously, during the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2005, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore reached a consensus that littoral states bear primary responsibility in securing the strait, and that user states and the international community have a significant role on the basis of respect for national sovereignty and adherence to international law. Notably, on that occasion Malaysian Defence Minister Najib Tun Razak also proposed an aerial patrol component dubbed “Eyes-in-the-Sky” (EiS) to complement MALSINDO.

However, shortly after a Thai product tanker was attacked in the Malacca Strait, leading various shipping industry representatives to view MALSINDO as ineffective. Arguably the biggest setback for MALSINDO came when Lloyd's Joint War Risks Committee classified the strait as a “high-risk war zone” on 1 July 2005.

Finding Common Ground

Galvanised by Lloyd's decision, within a month the three countries met in Batam and released a joint statement pledging stronger commitment towards Malacca Strait security. This discussion, described as a “landmark meeting” by Singapore's then Foreign Minister George Yeo, was significant in welcoming “assistance of the user states, relevant international agencies and the shipping community” to ensure strait security.

Key to this international involvement was the formation of a new Tripartite Technical Experts Group on Maritime Security. Moreover, the need to engage states bordering the “funnels” leading into both straits, including countries such as Thailand and India,

was highlighted. Coinciding with this “landmark meeting” was the formal announcement creating EiS – demonstrating the littoral states’ seriousness about securing the Malacca Strait, as Indonesian military authorities pointed out.

Further action was mooted at the Jakarta Meeting on the Straits of Malacca and Singapore: Enhancing Safety, Security and Environmental Protection in early September 2005, when Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand pledged to enhance strait security. Notably, Jakarta proposed Malacca Straits Security Initiative (MSSI) – a comprehensive approach comprising coordinated patrols and intelligence-sharing.

Notwithstanding the Batam “landmark meeting” and Jakarta Meeting, however, intra-regional differences continued to linger. For example, while Malaysia was supportive of Australia’s participation in EiS, Indonesia preferred "training assistance or capacity building" to direct foreign involvement in patrols. But clearly, the littoral states intended for no repeat of what happened prior to June 2004.

Vindicating MALSINDO

Building on Indonesia’s MSSI proposal in late 2005, the Terms of Reference and Standard Operating Procedures were inked by the Malacca Strait littoral states’ military chiefs in April 2006.

The Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP) was thus formalised, comprising the Malacca Strait Sea Patrol (formerly MALSINDO), EiS and the Intelligence Exchange Group. A Joint Coordinating Committee was also constituted with overseeing the patrols and facilitating communication, intelligence exchange and coordination.

Lloyd’s delisting of the strait from the “high risk war zone” category in August the same year vindicated the feasibility of a regional approach in collectively addressing a common security problem while setting aside intra-regional differences. In 2008, then IMO Secretary-General Efthimios Mitropoulos held up MSP as a model to emulate in addressing the Gulf of Aden piracy problems. This accolade was also echoed by the US Pacific Command in 2012.

Imperfect but Feasible Model

Recent ship hijacking and sea robbery cases, despite their high-profile media reporting, still showed that MSP cultivated the habit of multinational maritime security cooperation in Southeast Asia. This was evidenced by the littoral governments’ prompt response to some of those incidents. For instance, the navies and maritime enforcement agencies of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore coordinated a swift response to the boarding of tug boat *Permata 1* in September 2015.

Since then, MT *Joaquim* in the Malacca Strait and MV *Merlin* in the Philips Channel in August and October 2015 respectively were the last of high-profile ship hijacking and sea robbery cases in regional waters. The number of reported incidents has declined from 18 in September last year to zero successful incidents so far this year. Certainly, MSP still has inherent limitations to overcome. But which multinational security initiative can be deemed perfect?

After all, it is always contingent on any existing framework to evolve with the changing nature of security challenges. Southeast Asia by and large can draw useful lessons from such unique model as MSP to collectively address the evolving regional maritime security challenges.

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