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Warning at Sea: Be Prepared, Be Ready

By Bernard Miranda

Synopsis

Growing tensions in disputed waters and enforcement operations by maritime security agencies against various threats have resulted in warships and other vessels exchanging warning shots. The uncertainty posed by such actions can lead to conflict. The use of warnings at sea is increasingly critical.

Commentary

IN THE past few years there have been several incidents when warning shots were used at sea. In December 2015 a Russian warship fired warning shots at a Turkish fishing boat to “prevent a collision”. This action was carried out a month after a Turkish F-16 interceptor shot down a Russian Su-24 fighter-bomber for violating its airspace. In the same month, a South Korean naval vessel fired warning shots at a Chinese patrol boat thinking that it was a North Korean vessel near to the Yellow Sea Northern Limit Line.

In June 2016 the Indonesian Navy fired warning shots at a Chinese fishing boat operating within Indonesia’s exclusive economic zone. Purportedly a Chinese fisherman from a nearby boat was injured as a result of the action. More recently, a US destroyer fired warning shots at a group of four Iranian Revolutionary Coast Guard Corps Navy fast patrol boats that did not heed non-kinetic warnings and continued closing-in on the destroyer at high speed in the Strait of Hormuz.

Increasing Use of Warning at Sea

Tensions look set to continue building up in the areas like the South China Sea and the Strait of Hormuz, and maritime security threats like piracy and terrorism would

remain a concern. These are coupled with an uncertain and changing outlook in international relations. It should therefore not be surprising if the occurrence of incidents requiring warning at sea increases.

Enforcement agencies that deploy forces at sea in the vicinity of disputed areas, areas where tension exists and in areas with maritime security threats should put timely emphasis on planning, preparation and readiness in the use of warning at sea.

Naval and other government forces like Coast Guard vessels are deployed all over the world for various reasons like show of flag; maintaining presence for deterrence; asserting territorial integrity; policing troubled areas; multi-national operations and routine passage.

Policy imperatives, especially in disputed waters and where tensions exist, necessitate that tactical actions by forces be used effectively yet calibrated to be non-escalatory so that it does not result in direct engagement. And if direct action is taken, it must be further calibrated to be proportional by using a graduated set of pre-approved responses.

Warning Measures

Warning measures that are normally used begin with hailing by radio communications, coupled with benign actions like sounding of the ships horn and shining powerful lights at night to get the attention of the contact of interest. Over the years, technology advances and user needs, has resulted in the development of more effective equipment like Long Range Acoustic Devices (LRAD) that direct sound from greater ranges towards the threat.

More advanced navies also deploy Unmanned Surface Vessels (USV) equipped with mini-LRADS and mounted weapons to ward off the threat at greater distances from high value targets. These USVs are currently being used as deterrence in protected areas such as naval bases to supplement other defences.

The next levels of warning are those that are visually noticeable like smoke generating devices and illumination by signal flares. These measures require physical deployment of visible non-lethal means from the vessel or deployed helicopters. It is hard not to notice these visual warnings and if they are not heeded, it triggers a higher degree of response in the form of kinetic actions.

Kinetic action can consist of “bumping” of ships and firing of warning shots. Bumping has been used in the past, for example as far back as February 1988, two Soviet warships bumped and grazed US warships that had sailed within seven nautical miles of the Crimean Peninsula. But such use of bumping is rare and any ship’s captain would refrain from such actions that can cause damage to one’s own ship if not executed skilfully with a high degree of seamanship.

The preferred mode of kinetic action therefore is to fire warning shots. The guns can be manually controlled from ships or deployed helicopters or preferably with more accurate super rapid system controlled guns.

Considerations in Use of Warning

Policy must dictate and allow the use of warning by tactical forces. The legal mandate and political implications of actions by tactical forces must be weighed heavily and take into consideration the area of operations and the mandate given under international law, relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions and with due consideration to safety of lives at sea.

These policies are translated into Rules of Engagement (ROEs) for the use of graduated, non-escalatory and proportional response with enough flexibility built in to allow forces to react with disabling or destructive fire if required.

Tactical forces at sea must be well connected with their national headquarters by robust means of communications. Clear command and control must be established to apply the ROEs and guide commanders on the use of appropriate measures. The ROE must also equip commanders with the ability to make sound and timely decisions to respond quickly to changing situations that can potentially escalate beyond warning.

Standard operating procedures and fire control orders and systems for warning shots must be fine-tuned such that human error is eliminated. The procedures developed must be trained and practiced at sea repeatedly to ensure competence and confidence. Safeguards must be made in the execution such that warnings do not end up with unintended consequences like loss of life and collateral damage. Tactical commanders must also be drilled to deal with the unexpected and must not flinch in deciding to execute warnings without doubt or delay.

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