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Terror in the Malacca Strait: The Risks of Overreaction

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A warning from a presumably reliable source of a planned terrorist attack on an oil tanker in the Malacca Strait has led to renewed speculation about terrorist threats to shipping in this important waterway. However, these threats should be kept in perspective.

MALACCA STRAIT SECURITY has been increased following a warning of possible terrorist attacks on tankers using the strait. Old scenarios about blocking the strait and using ships as “floating bombs” have been mentioned, but it’s important the threat be kept in perspective unless there is a repeat of the situation in 2005 when the strait was assessed as a “war risk”.

Important questions need addressing. How might threats eventuate? What are the more credible scenarios? Which terrorist groups have the capability to mount a major attack? Which ships are most at risk? What are appropriate responses? Without balanced answers to these questions, resources will be wasted, unnecessary disruption caused, and more credible scenarios overlooked because response efforts were focussed on high impact, low probability events.

Attack Scenarios

It is not difficult to conjure up worst case scenarios. A ship sunk to block the strait is a popular one, but this lacks credibility. Even at the most narrow point of the traffic separation scheme (TSS) off One Fathom Bank, the channel is about 1,000 metres wide. More than one large vessel would have to be sunk to effectively block one side of the TSS. Even then, it would be simple traffic management to temporarily route deep draught vessels on the other side, and vessels of lesser draught could be routed outside the TSS.

Successfully hijacking a large vessel is difficult, and probably beyond the capabilities of regional terrorist groups. With strong tidal streams in the strait, sinking a large vessel in the best position would be extremely demanding even for highly experienced seafarers with tug assistance. Causing a fire and

explosion onboard a tanker leading to a large burning oil slick is marginally more credible.

Using a ship with a dangerous cargo as a “floating bomb” is another scenario but it is also barely credible. Larger tankers and LNG carriers are usually mentioned although chemical tankers and ships with volatile cargoes (e.g. ammonium nitrate) might also be considered. Again there would be problems with successfully hijacking such a vessel and navigating it into a position to cause maximum damage. More importantly, even the most technically competent terrorists should not be confident an attack of this nature would be successful. Missile attacks on tankers during the “tanker war” of the 1980s showed how difficult it is to ignite a fire on a tanker, and similarly, expert opinion suggests it would be difficult to cause an LNG carrier to explode.

A smaller tanker, LPG carrier, or chemical tanker might be a better prospect, although the extent of damage caused might be less than that from an attack on a larger vessel. Smaller vessels are more easily hijacked, and with their smaller crews, it might even be possible to hide the fact from port authorities that the vessel had been hijacked and crewed by terrorists.

Following suicide small boat attacks on the tanker *Limburg* and USS *Cole* early this century, speedboats may be the preferred terrorist weapon. These craft offer advantages with their manoeuvrability, speed, stealth and surprise, but such attacks are still not easy. The *Limburg* and *Cole* attacks both occurred in relatively insecure waters. An attack would be harder in waters where terrorists may have difficulty in finding a secure launching area for the attack.

Deductions

This consideration of possible scenarios leads to several deductions about dealing with terrorism in the Malacca Strait. First, while extra patrolling at sea by both ships and aircraft constitutes a significant deterrent, it’s unlikely to prevent a well planned and determined suicide attack. Warning of such an attack would be very short. Its prevention requires good intelligence and extra vigilance on land. The security of the strait begins on land.

Secondly, most reference has been made to large vessels as potential targets. However, smaller ships are more vulnerable than their larger sisters. They are common in the Malacca Strait both at sea and anchored off littoral ports, including in relatively insecure ports - as evidenced by the number of pirate attacks that continue on ships in port or at anchor. The vulnerable spots include anchorages in the eastern Singapore Strait where many ships of all types and sizes are laid up as a consequence of the global financial crisis and the downturn in shipping.

Blowing up a small vessel, or a larger vessel at anchor, would go a long way towards meeting the objectives of a terrorist group. It would lead to international media reports of a terrorist attack on a tanker in the strait, and likely cause a disproportionate reaction around the world, including increased insurance premiums and shipping disruptions. As well as increased patrols at sea, additional policing is required of ports and anchorages - and onshore.

Risks of Overreaction

In 2005, the London insurance market’s Joint War Committee (JWC) declared the Malacca Strait a “war risk zone”. This was based on ill-founded assessments of potential links between pirates and terrorists. It was also suggested that an attack on the chemical tanker *Dewi Madrim* in March 2003 had been a case of terrorists learning to drive a ship. However, this ship was very small, only 737 gross tonnes, and no great skill would be required to drive her. Subsequent investigations confirmed that the incident was a straightforward pirate attack.

The “war risk” assessment shocked the littoral states, especially Singapore with concern that ships might

be turned away from the port of Singapore and its supporting shipping services. After increased patrols were instituted by the littoral countries and a fall in incidents of piracy, the JWC lifted its “war risk” assessment.

Assessments of the threat of maritime terrorism must be rational and represent a reasonable balance between the likelihood of an attack occurring, its impact, and the costs of providing additional security. Assessments depend on many factors, especially the capabilities and intentions of prospective terrorists, the vulnerability of particular targets, and the consequences of an attack should one occur.

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