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Piracy in the South China Sea: Lessons from Gulf of Aden

By Joshua Ho

Synopsis

There has been a marked increase in the total number of piracy incidents against ships in Asia in 2010 compared to previous years. In terms of location, the South China Sea stood out. Can the counter-piracy actions in the Gulf of Aden be applied to the South China Sea?

Commentary

THE ANNUAL report released by the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ISC) in January 2011 noted a marked increase in the total number of incidents or piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia in 2010. This compares unfavourably to the period of 2006-2009 when there was a 60 percent increase in incidents over the numbers in 2009. Much of the increase can be attributed to incidents occurring in ports and anchorages but one area stood out -- the South China Sea.

In 2010, 17 actual incidents were reported in the South China Sea, the highest number of incidents reported during the five-year period from 2006-2010. The number of incidents also represented a 55 percent increase over 2009, which also saw an increase of 120 percent over 2008. Most of the incidents occurred in international sea lanes off Pulau Anambas and Pulau Mangkai. What is a cause for concern is that the boats being targeted have not been limited to small slow-moving ships like tugs alone, but also included bulk carriers, container ships as well as product, oil, LNG and chemical tankers.

If nothing is done to curb the number of incidents in the South China Sea, the upward trend since 2009 is likely to persist into 2011. What can be done? It is useful to look at what has been done in the Gulf of Aden to see if the same counter-actions can be applied to the South China Sea.

Combined Patrols

Since the end of 2008, there has been an increase in coordinated anti-piracy patrols conducted in the Gulf of Aden. These patrols were by three groups of countries -- the European Union, those under the combined coalition task force, CTF-151, and those operating independently such as China, India and Russia. The patrols comprise both sea as well as maritime air patrols. The conduct of the combined patrols have been successful as piracy in the areas under patrol have dropped and the forces on scene have successfully thwarted several attacks as well as intercepted and detained numerous pirates.

Given the success of anti-piracy patrols not only in the Gulf of Aden but also in the Malacca Strait, perhaps it is time to examine if the concept of the Malacca Strait patrols could be extended to the South China Sea. As many of the attacks have occurred in the sea lanes, it may be worthwhile examining if a coalition involving not just the littoral states but also comprising the users of the sea lanes can be involved to provide such patrols.

Reporting to Communications Centres

Supporting and facilitating protection efforts by the naval forces in the Gulf of Aden are various communications centres to coordinate communication between vessels in transit and military forces on scene. These include the Maritime Security Centre – Horn of Africa (MSCHOA), an initiative by the European Union forces, which provides a 24-hour manned monitoring of vessels transiting through the Gulf of Aden. There is an interactive website for communication of the latest anti-piracy guidance to industry as well as for shipping companies and operators to register their movements through the region.

Other centres which perform similar functions in the Gulf of Aden region include the UK Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) office, the NATO Shipping Centre as well as the Maritime Liaison Office (MARLO). Although a regional centre for the reporting of piracy incidents in the South China Sea exist in the form of the ReCAAP ISC, ships only report to the centre after an actual or attempted piracy attack. It may be worthwhile examining if ships should report to the centre before transiting the sea lanes in the South China Sea. Such information can then be passed on to the law enforcement agencies on the ground to enable them to focus on the more vulnerable areas or protect the more vulnerable ships. To perform this function adequately, the ReCAAP ISC may need to become an operations centre that is manned 24/7.

Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC)

In the Gulf of Aden, an Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC) has been set-up along the sea lanes where ships are recommended to route through when transiting the Gulf of Aden. The IRTC allows the naval forces on scene to conduct concentrated patrols in the corridor thereby greatly reducing the geographical area required to be covered. There has been a marked decrease in the number of attacks on ships that use the IRTC.

Since many of the attacks occur in a stretch of the sea lane in the South China Sea, the littoral countries may want to consider implementing a similar corridor to focus law enforcement efforts in order to mitigate the scarce number of patrol craft available and the large area of operations to be covered.

The current piracy situation in the South China Sea is a cause for concern due to the dramatic increase in its numbers over the last two years. More so, many of the incidents have happened in international sea lanes. Whilst the incidents have not been severe at the moment, this should not prevent the littoral countries – Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore -- from taking action. A lack of commitment might be seen as weakness which could prompt further acts of piracy. When performed without checks on a sustained basis, these acts of piracy could easily get out of control, like in the Gulf of Aden.

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