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Maritime Security Threats in Southeast Asia: A Collective Approach

By Bernard Miranda

Synopsis

Being a small island-nation with busy and congested waterways, Singapore faces significant maritime security challenges, in particular maritime terrorism which is a common threat also faced by neighbouring states. Hence information sharing, international and inter-agency collaboration constitute the way ahead for a collective solution against such challenges.

Commentary

THE ARREST of six militants in neighbouring Batam, Indonesia reminded Singapore of the asymmetric and unconventional threat it can face from the region. While the plausibility of the threat of a rocket attack from Batam Island continues to be analysed, one should also look at other modalities that the militants could have used to overcome range and accuracy factors, for example bringing the weapon closer by means of vessels at sea.

Other threats like “floating bomb” by hijacked sensitive vessels or explosive-laden small boats intent on ramming high-value targets, remain concerns. The recent missiles purportedly fired by Houthi rebels at the USS Mason and USS Ponce from the Yemeni coast is another example of how non-professionally trained fighting forces can attempt to wreak havoc.

Information Sharing and International Collaboration

Information sharing and international collaboration has been established over the years to deal with varied maritime security threats. Such mechanisms like the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) bring countries together to collaborate against a

common threat. At the national level the Singapore Government established the National Maritime Security System in 2011 to provide the dual focus of a Single Concept of Operation and a Unified Command to prepare, prevent and respond to maritime terrorism. The Singapore Maritime Crisis Centre (SMCC) together with enforcement agencies is highly vigilant, prepared and responsive.

Singapore's Home Affairs Minister stated, after the arrest of the six militants, that Singapore was aware of their activities and noted the country's security agencies and their Indonesian counterparts had coordinated to closely monitor and apprehend the perpetrators.

Such information sharing and collaboration results from years of commitment and effort, including linkages established amongst navies and law enforcement agencies especially in the maritime domain. An organisation such as the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) at the Changi Command and Control Centre (CC2C) has grown in effectiveness and stature as a model for regional naval cooperation.

Focussing on all areas of maritime security as its core business, the IFC has established a strong liaison officer presence and effective networked systems, data base and sense-making tool for data analysis. There is also the secure information sharing system for Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) member navies and the Malacca Strait Patrol-Information sharing system for real-time information exchange between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. The network connectivity and usefulness of these systems will be further enhanced with planned new data architecture and mobile capability.

In late September this year, the Republic of Singapore Navy hosted Exercise Deep Sabre. This exercise was the latest in a series of PSI multi-national exercises that brings countries together to collaborate against a common threat. This exercise featured 800 participants from 21 countries in building capacity against a ship simulating as a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) carrier. Such exercises, by sheer size and complexity exhibits the collective will to deter would-be perpetrators and enhance collaboration.

Regional players must continue to build on established linkages and continue to support their presence through liaison officers' attachments and participation in collaborative exercises.

SMCC – Inter-Agency Collaboration

The core team in both entities that form the SMCC - the Operations and Sense-making Groups - achieved Initial Operational Capability during Exercise Northstar VIII in 2011. Building on this, the core team then achieved Full Operational Capability in Exercise Highcrest 2013 by demonstrating its ability to work with counterpart land agencies in handling multiple threats both on land and sea.

The achievements in a relatively short time were no mean feat. The capabilities were attained through: 1) team forming and building to overcome inter-agency stovepipes; 2) commitment from agencies to fund and staff the posts from five different agencies

the Navy, Police, Immigration and Checkpoints Authority, Customs and the Maritime and Port Authority; 3) establishment of the Crisis Command Centre at the CC2C and its sense-making and operations systems; 4) unifying management and leadership; 5) having a national-level training and exercises framework that validates capabilities and renews inter-agency commitment with the Whole-of-Government approach; and 6) coherent public communications plan to emphasise the need for vigilance against would-be perpetrators.

Coordination and the Challenges Ahead

Dealing with maritime terrorism requires a phased and scalable approach in order to be effective. Coordination is done on a daily basis through working group meetings, inter-agency training and exercises with established processes and procedures that are accepted by all agencies.

Ownership is key to operational and capability development, with pre-assignments of Incident Managers to deal with scenarios timely and decisively. There could be at least four scenarios: 1) from land – as in the recent case of the Batam rocket plot; 2) from the sea – militants/terrorists could plausibly launch a boat from neighbouring lands and hijack an innocent vessel for use as an attack platform; 3) at sea – an attack from a militant/terrorist vessel on an innocent merchant ship; and 4) a combination of scenarios attempting to dilute the defences. The organisation needs to be nimble enough to respond to unanticipated or unknown threats, including “Black Swan” scenarios.

Enforcement agencies should continue to scale surveillance and presence with co-ordinated efforts in operations centres and at sea. New capabilities like the Police Coast Guards Patrol Interdiction, 2nd Generation PK class High Speed Interception boats and unmanned surface vessels enhance presence and response at sea, while panoramic electro-optics and tethered unmanned aerial vehicles will enhance especially “blind zone” surveillance capabilities.

Importantly, to be nimble and responsive, there is a requirement for steadfast leadership and clear lines of command. The SMCC provides this support mechanism that coordinates and manages operations, swiftly and decisively, enabling the concepts for Unified Command and Single Concept of Operations.

In the ever-changing threat environment, and with scarce resources, the information sharing and international collaboration initiatives and SMCC must continue to demonstrate ability to coordinate, manage and provide leadership support in dealing with maritime terrorism. In this regard, various countries and agencies need to continue to support organisations such as the IFC and SMCC and sustain this international and inter-agency framework to maintain their operational edge.

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