

## **Maritime Terrorism – A Threat to World Trade?**

**by Dr. Peter Roell**

### **Abstract**

Until now there have only been a few incidences of maritime terrorism. Examples are the attack on the USS Cole in October 2000 or the attack on the French oil tanker Limburg in October 2002. The most significant attack in terms of casualties occurred in February 2004 when the Abu Sayyaf Group attacked a passenger ferry in the Philippines resulting in almost 100 deaths.

Given the wish for maximum casualties and economic impact the maritime industry has distinct correlations to the aviation industry. The in-flight destruction of a fully laden jumbo jet is as attractive to the terrorists as is an explosion of a large tanker in a mega harbour – preferable in Europe or the United States.

The issue of choke points is vastly exaggerated as choke points, even the Straits of Malacca, can be circumnavigated. The issue is the effect of a major maritime attack on public opinion and not on the infrastructure. The aim of the terrorists ever since 9/11 has been to create an incident greater than what happened in the United States. Even the terrorists realize that they are not able to disrupt trade with great effect but that they can influence public opinion with spectacular attacks.

So far, there is no hard proof that criminal elements, such as pirates in Somalia, are working together with terrorist organisations. Such a possibility is given which makes it even more important to combat piracy whenever it might occur. After all, terrorists are opportunistically seeking potential allies.

The private security sector can play a major role in this fight as they are already playing a major role in providing security advice to companies. Maritime terrorism does present a threat to world trade, and maritime terrorism has the potential of providing terrorist organisations with the mega event they have been seeking since 9/11.

## **Preliminary Remarks**

Mr. Chairman,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Firstly, I would like to thank the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Asian Political & International Studies Association (APISA) and the Keio University very much for inviting us to Japan. As a member of the German delegation I am glad to participate in the international conference *Comprehensive Security in the Asia-Pacific Region*.

In my short lecture *Maritime Terrorism - A Threat to World Trade?* I would like to present three observations:

1. Maritime terrorism is reality, not fiction
2. „Choke Points“ and mega harbours are in the focus of terrorists
3. In order to fight maritime terrorism and piracy cooperation between governments and the private sector is crucial

It is difficult to define *maritime terrorism*, particularly because the United Nations have so far not been able to find a binding definition for *terrorism*. The US Department of Defence defines *terrorism* as “unlawful use or threatened use or force of violence against people or property to coerce or intimidate governments or societies, often to achieve political, religious or ideological objectives“.

It is obvious – if we have a look at the attacks by pirates at the Horn of Africa and in the Indian Ocean – that monetary reasons prevail, acts of hijacking and blackmailing cannot be defined as *maritime terrorism* but as *Organised Crime*.

Let me now come to my first observation:

### **Observation 1: Maritime terrorism is reality, not fiction**

To analyse the maritime terrorist threats it is not enough to examine the capabilities and motives of terrorist groups, but also to examine the maritime industry, shipping practices, the vulnerability of trade shipping as well as countermeasures by the authorities and other institutions which are entrusted with the security of the shipping routes. Let me give some examples of planned or executed maritime terrorist attacks:

#### **January 2000**

Al-Qaida members carried out an unsuccessful attack in Aden against the USS Sullivans. But the boat, overloaded with explosives, sank before it could reach the target.

#### **October 2000**

Successful Al-Qaida attack against the US destroyer USS Cole in Yemen. 17 US sailors were killed, 39 wounded.

#### **June 2002**

Members of Al-Qaida, who had planned attacks against British and US ships in the Strait of Gibraltar, were arrested by Morocco’s secret service.

## **October 2002**

A terror group from Yemen, having connections with Al-Qaida, attacked the French oil tanker Limburg off the harbour of Ash Shahir. One crew member was killed, others wounded. 90 000 tons of oil polluted in the Gulf of Aden. As a result the monthly container transshipment in Yemen declined from 43 000 to 3 000 containers. 3 000 dockers lost their jobs and the national economy shrunk by 1 % GDP.

## **February 2004**

Bomb attack by the Abu Sayyaf group against a passenger ferry in the Philippines. Over 100 people were killed.

## **August 2005**

Israel's security service Shin Bet warned four Israeli cruise liners – on their passage to Turkey – about a possible terror attack and redirected the ships to Cyprus.

## **July 2009**

Egypt's security authorities prevented an attack against the Suez Canal and the adjacent oil pipeline. According to sources in Cairo the terror group consisted of 24 Egyptians and one Palestinian.

Due to the knowledge of Western intelligence services some Islamic terror groups have declared, that it is their aim to interrupt Western supply lines. The 2<sup>nd</sup> man of Al-Qaida, Aiman Al-Sawahri: "We must stop the West plundering the oil of Muslims."

Often, people claim that terrorist groups could probably form alliances with organised crime groups and pirates. But there is no proof for such a claim. Islamic terror groups isolate themselves extremely and are suspicious of outsiders, especially when they do not share the same ideology. It is worthwhile to note that during the last 15 years only 2 % of all terrorist attacks could be assigned to maritime terrorism. Although maritime terrorist attacks cannot be excluded in the future and should not be played down, special operational capabilities are required which the terrorists probably have not yet at their disposal. However, it could be that the pirates in Somalia are contributing to terrorist organisations by paying some form of protection money.

In this context we should not forget the plans of Al-Qaida chief planner for maritime terrorism, Abd Al Rahman Al Nashiri, also called the Prince of the Sea, who was arrested in November 2002 in the United Arab Emirates. Nashiri had developed a strategy including the following four elements:

- Ramming or blowing up medium-sized ships in the vicinity of other ships or in harbours;
- Attacking super tankers from the air with small planes, packed with explosives;
- Underwater attacks against ships using divers;
- Attacks against cruise liners and taking hostages

## **Observation 2: „Choke points“ and mega harbours are in the focus of terrorists**

Terrorists will ask themselves at which locations they can decisively hit the infrastructure of the industrialised world because up to now the maritime terrorist attacks have not threatened world

trade seriously. They will direct their attention to so-called *choke points* and mega harbours as 75 % of the international ocean traffic with approximately 50 000 ships is processed in approximately 2 800 harbours.

As many of the biggest harbours in the world are located in East and Southeast Asia and most of the trade is directed via sea routes in this region, terrorists will pay special attention to this region in their target planning. These may include the following harbours: Kobe, Tokyo, Yokohama, Pusan, Shanghai, Kaohsiung, Hong Kong and Singapore. Of course, also mega harbours in the United States and in Europe may be in the focus of terrorists.

The strategically important Straits of Malacca is one of the critical *choke points*. It connects the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea and the Pacific. It is the most important trade route between the Far East, the Gulf States and Europe. 90 000 ships per year pass the Straits of Malacca. One third of the world trade, 80 % of oil imports for East Asia and two third of the worldwide liquid gas transports go via this route.

A terror attack, for example the sinking of a tanker in the Straits of Malacca, would block the straits. Ships would have to make a detour of 1 000 km via the Indonesian Strait of Sunda and Flores. The ships would have to be at sea for 2 extra days, which would result in 8 billion US dollars additional costs per year. Freight and insurance rates would increase and the market price for all transported goods would also increase in a short period of time with negative economic effects on the region and world trade.

Blown up container ships could block harbours for weeks – quite apart from an attack in one of the 20 mega harbours with a so-called *dirty bomb*. A closure of the Singapore harbour for example, would cost more than 200 billion US dollars per year. Also the terrorist attack of a fully loaded gas tanker in one of the mega harbours would have a devastating effect on the world trade and provide terrorists with an event comparable to 9/11.

But terrorist attacks can also be expected at other *choke points* such as the Straits of Hormuz, Bab al Mandat, the Suez Canal, Bosphorus, Straits of Gibraltar or the Panama Canal. We in Europe should also not forget the English Channel.

In conclusion: Yes, world trade is potentially threatened by maritime terrorism.

### **Observation 3: Fighting potential maritime terrorism and piracy cooperation between state institutions and the private sector is crucial**

An efficient cooperation between states could improve the maritime security situation. This can also be seen in the more intensive and successful cooperation between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia over the last few years.

Pirate attacks in Indonesia have been reduced from 121 in the year 2003 to 43 in the year 2007 and in the first half year of 2009 to 2. In the Straits of Malacca we also could observe a positive development. In 2004, 38 attacks were recorded, in 2007 only 7 and in the first half year of 2009, 2.

The situation off the Horn of Africa is very different. In the first 9 months of 2009, 114 ships were boarded, 34 hijacked, 88 came under fire. 661 persons were taken hostage.

Also helpful is the Container Security Initiative (CSI), initiated by the United States in 2002. The aim of this programme is to identify – out of the 230 million containers which are

transported by sea every year – those containers with weapons of mass destruction or dangerous nuclear substances which could be used by terrorists for their attacks. Containers, designated for the United States, are checked at the harbour of departure. At present, US officials are working in more than 46 harbours.

However, US plans to examine all US-bound containers are unrealistic and moreover, impossible. Timely intelligence is here the name of the game.

In cooperation with state organisations and the industry, technical means are also used to protect against potential terror attacks. For example, the scanning of huge containers, the use of Long-Range Acoustic Devices (LRAD) which proved to be very effective when pirates tried to attack the cruise liner *Seabourne Spirit* on Nov 5, 2005. Furthermore, anti-boarding systems, such as 9 000-Volt-protective-fences for merchant ships make the boarding for pirates or terrorists more difficult. Also unmanned ‘inventus systems’ are used. Equipped with cameras, they are capable of searching huge parts of the oceans and transmit this data to a ship or to a ground station.

I also would like to draw your attention to a new trend. Due to the intensive attacks against ships, the loss of sea freight, the increase of insurance rates and the resulting losses of 16 billion US dollars annually, states are intensifying their cooperation with private security companies, which are specialised in maritime security. In this field, British and US companies are playing a leading role.

Given the configuration of modern naval warships, designed to counter the threat of other modern Navies, it becomes clear that such ships are unsuitable to counter terrorists or counter piracy operations. We can either resort to the private sector, which could protect cargo vessels by deploying guards on board, or governments need to build and deploy suitable naval vessels designed to counter this new threat.

If we understand security policy in a more comprehensive way, that means the political, economic, social, ecological and military dimensions must be considered together and must be brought together, then maritime terrorism can only be fought successfully in cooperation between state institutions and the private sector.

Let me finish my short statement with a motto that has guided NATO for many years and has provided peace, freedom and security to all of us:



**Vigilance is the price of freedom**

**Remarks:**

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