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Piracy in Southeast Asia – The Current Situation

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Synopsis

Recent media reports claim that piracy is again a major problem in Southeast Asia but a closer look at the situation suggests these reports are alarmist.

Commentary

CHANNEL NEWS ASIA recently carried a report that piracy in Southeast Asia had surged, particularly in 'the maritime trading hub of the Malacca Straits' with the number of attacks in the region topping 150 in 2013. Similar reports have suggested that Southeast Asia is now the worst region globally for piracy.

These reports quoting the absolute number of attacks are misleading. To obtain a true appreciation of the current situation with piracy and sea robbery, it is necessary to look more closely at individual attacks, at what types of ship are being attacked, and where they are when attacked. A basic source of distortion occurs because a very minor incident of petty theft from a ship at anchor counts as one attack equivalent to a major incident of ship hijacking. This significantly inflates the number of attacks.

Overstating the risks of piracy may cause an over-reaction from the international community with extra costs for ship owners and higher charges for shippers. These additional costs might arise from increased insurance premiums and additional security charges, including the possible employment of armed security guards. In an extreme example of over-reaction, ships may be deterred from using the Malacca and Singapore straits with significant economic implications for Singapore in particular.

Close analysis of the incidents of piracy and sea robbery in Southeast Asia shows that three categories of vessel are being attacked: ships in port or at anchor, small product tankers, and tugs and barges.

Ships at Anchor

While the vulnerability of a ship underway depends on factors, such as size of ship and crew, speed and freeboard, any ship at all may be attacked while at anchor or in port if appropriate security precautions are not observed.

Of the 150 attacks reported in Asian waters in 2013 by the Information Sharing Centre of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), 110 involved ships at anchor and at berth. 70 of these incidents occurred in or near ports in Indonesia, particularly Belawan (16 incidents) and Samarinda (11 incidents). Most only involved petty theft. 12 attacks occurred on

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tankers undertaking ship-to-ship transfer operations off Pulau Nipa in the western part of Singapore Strait.

Product Tankers

Small product tankers of about 1000 gross tons are very common in regional waters. Due to their size, relatively slow speed and low freeboard when laden, they are particularly vulnerable to attack. A further problem arises because some of these vessels may not be compliant with the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code which applies to most of these vessels and prescribes mandatory security requirements for them.

In recent years, some small product tankers have been hijacked for several days while some or all of their cargo, usually marine gas oil, is siphoned off into another vessel. This is a form of transnational organised crime with suspicions of an 'inside job' and possible corrupt officials. It may also be significant that some ships attacked in this way are sub-standard not fully compliant with necessary international standards of security, safety and crew qualifications.

A 2012 report from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) found that sub-standard vessels were more likely to be involved in smuggling activities than quality ships. This could be the case with some small product tankers in Southeast Asian waters. A recent report on people smuggling by an Australian investigative journalist found that most illegal boat arrivals in Australia transited through Malaysia with some using 'the so-called bunker ships which idled in international waters and gathered asylum seekers in their hulls for delivery to Indonesia'. Small product tankers may also be bunkering tankers.

Tugs and Barges

Like product tankers, tugs and barges are vulnerable to attack due to their small size and speed. The number of these vessels in regional waters has increased over recent years including some making the long passage down the South China Sea from Cambodia and Vietnam to Singapore with sand and gravel for the construction industry and reclamation works.

Most attacks on tugs and barges involve the theft of cash and valuables from the ships and crews, but some have been more serious cases of ship hijacking. While the barge is usually recovered, in several incidents the tug has not been recovered; it's likely being recycled and put to use under another name. This is possible because most of these small vessels are not required to comply with the ISPS Code.

Private Maritime Security Companies

Private maritime security companies (PMSCs) are both part of the solution and part of the problem. High value and vulnerable targets, such as oil rigs under tow, may employ armed guards supplied by PMSCs when passing through risky areas, but the vast bulk of shipping using the Malacca and Singapore straits has no requirement for this form of security. Also by offering both risk assessments and the means of countering the risks, PMSCs are often guilty of 'beating up' the risks. This has been evident in some recent assessments in the media of the risks of piracy in the region that have been sourced to PMSCs.

While piracy and sea robbery remain problems in parts of Southeast Asia, the threat should be kept in perspective. Most ships transiting regional waters are not at risk unless they slow down or anchor in areas where attacks occur. Major requirements to reduce the number of attacks in the region include better security in ports and anchorages and effective inter-agency coordination both at sea and onshore. The more serious attacks involve the hijacking of small product tankers and tugs and barges. These attacks are invariably transnational in nature indicating the importance of close cooperation onshore between regional police forces to deal with this form of maritime crime.

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