



# Asia Pacific Bulletin

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## Calming the Waters in Maritime Southeast Asia BY IAN STOREY

**Ian Storey**, Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, explains that “As the world’s navies struggle to stem the rising tide of piracy off the coast of Somalia, the maritime security situation in Southeast Asia continues to meliorate.”

As the world’s navies struggle to stem the rising tide of piracy off the coast of Somalia, the maritime security situation in Southeast Asia continues to meliorate. This laudable state of affairs comes more than five years after a furor erupted in the region over how best to provide for security in the Malacca Strait, the vital artery of world trade that links Northeast Asia with the Indian Ocean and through which a significant proportion of global commerce and energy supplies passes.

Since the late 1990s, piratical attacks had been on the rise in Southeast Asia, and after 9/11, security analysts painted dire scenarios in which pirates and terrorists joined forces to disrupt shipping, and hence the global economy, by sinking ships in the Malacca Strait or using oil tankers as “floating bombs.”

In early 2004, U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) offered to assist regional states address escalating maritime security threats with a capacity-building program called the Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI). However, when then PACOM Commander Admiral Thomas Fargo seemed to give the impression that he was considering stationing U.S. special forces in the strait, the resulting outcry from Indonesia and Malaysia rendered RMSI dead in the water. Both governments claimed the presence of U.S. forces in the strait would not only infringe on their sovereignty, but also serve as a magnet for Islamic extremists.

Having rejected the RMSI proposal, the ball was firmly in the court of the three littoral states, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. To its credit, the Indonesian government ran with the ball, enlisting the support of Malaysia and Singapore to conduct year-round coordinated naval patrols in the strait beginning in July 2004. Over the next two years, an aerial surveillance component was added, an intelligence exchange mechanism established, standard operating procedures signed, and the initiative renamed the Malacca Straits Patrols (MSP). In late 2008, Thailand agreed to participate in MSP.

Of equal, if not greater, importance to the MSP has been the unilateral actions taken by the Indonesian government, as the locus of the maritime crime problem was always in its territorial waters. When the Indonesian economy buckled in 1998, defense cuts weakened the Navy’s ability to patrol the country’s vast archipelagic waters, providing increased opportunities for unemployed mariners to attack commercial vessels. Between 2000 and 2006 a quarter of global piracy incidents, and two-thirds of those in Southeast Asia, occurred in Indonesian waters.



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Determined to repair the nation’s sullied image, in 2005 President Yudhoyono ordered the military to increase naval patrols in the country’s waters adjacent to the Malacca Strait and step-up intelligence gathering operations in coastal communities.

Regional security initiatives have paid strong dividends. According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), incidents of maritime crime in Southeast Asia dropped 65% between 2003 and 2008, from 187 to 65 attacks. In the Malacca Strait only two attacks were reported for the whole of 2008, compared with a high of 34 in 2004. Particularly striking has been improved security in Indonesian waters: 28 attacks were reported last year, down from a high of 121 in 2003.

In 2008 the IMB commended the MSP as “directly attributable to keeping the overall number of incidents in this important strategic chokepoint down.” The maritime watchdog was also fulsome in its praise for Indonesia’s “tireless efforts in curbing piracy and armed robbery in its waters.”

Credit should also be given to external powers that have been providing assistance to regional states over the past few years. Japan has been providing capacity building support to Southeast Asian countries since the 1960s, but recently the United States has been at the forefront of such efforts. Despite the RMSI controversy, the littoral states welcomed capacity building support from America in the form of training, joint exercises, equipment transfer, and information exchange.

In 2006, the U.S. National Defense Authorization Act authorized the Pentagon to assist foreign countries improve maritime security and counter-terrorism capabilities under the Global Train and Equip Program. Since 2006 the United States has dispersed \$47.1 million to Indonesia, \$16.3 million to Malaysia, and \$15.3 million to the Philippines. With the situation in the Malacca Strait largely under control, the bulk of this funding has been spent on projects designed to improve security in the Sulu and Celebes seas, the so-called tri-border sea area which has become a haven for pirates, smugglers and, more worryingly, terrorists transiting between the southern Philippines, Malaysia’s Sabah, and Indonesia. Global Train and Equip has provided Indonesia with 12 coastal surveillance radar stations (five along the Malacca Strait and seven in the Makassar Strait and Celebes Sea), nine radar stations along the Sabah coast, and has helped to upgrade the maritime surveillance and interdiction capabilities of the Philippine armed forces. Conscious of the RMSI debacle, the United States has assessed security needs in consultation with recipient governments and implemented the program in a low-key fashion.

Much has been achieved over the past five years, yet much more remains to be done. The MSP would be a much more effective instrument of security cooperation if it graduated from coordinated to joint patrols: Indonesia needs a unified and well-equipped coast guard to resolve jurisdictional overlaps and inter-agency rivalry, and security cooperation among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in the tri-border area is patchy and episodic and hampered by lack of resources. In the Malacca Strait, the littoral states must maintain constant vigilance. This will be difficult for Indonesia as the MSP places great strain on the Navy’s limited resources and the government has cut defense expenditures by 15% for 2009. The littoral states cannot afford to be complacent. Both the Malaysian and Indonesian navies have warned that the global economic downturn could result in an upsurge in piracy in Southeast Asia in the coming years.