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Piracy in the South China Sea: Maritime Ambushes off the Mangkai Passage

Eric Frécon

20 February 2009

The Malacca Strait is now increasingly safe. But what about surrounding areas such as Anambas Islands in the South China Sea? Attacks occurred last year in this outlying place and the growing danger there deserves as much attention.



INCREASING PATROLS in the Malacca Strait by the littoral states of Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore have deterred piracy and armed robbery in this important waterway. While the Malacca Strait is increasingly safe for international shipping, this is not really so for the waterway in Mangkai, one of Indonesia's Anambas Islands off the east coast of peninsular Malaysia in the South China Sea.

The lighthouses on Mangkai and the nearby Tokong Biru islet, are also important landmarks for ships moving to and from Singapore. In fact, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) has raised the alarm by publishing a "piracy alert" on its website on 27 December 2008 after six incidents were reported. The six actual or attempted attacks occurred within a 50 km radius in the east of Mangkai in 2008 (or twelve attacks in a 150 km radius), with a peak in October. In comparison, two attacks were reported in this area in 2007 and zero in 2006.

Most Ships Safe in the Malacca Strait

According to IMB statistics, fewer attacks are taking place in the Malacca Strait. The IMB reported 46 attacks in the Malacca and Singapore Straits in 2004, 19 in 2005, 16 in 2006, 10 in 2007 and only eight in 2008. Even if the patrol vessels are in short supply or are too big to track sea robbers among islets and mangroves, the naval and air operations set up by the coastal states have had a psychological impact on the criminals. According to a pirate who is waiting for opportunities to attack vessels, most of his 'colleagues' are now afraid of these patrols. Besides, it would be even more difficult to launder money stolen from seamen since gambling is forbidden in Batam (Indonesia). Moreover, it would not be as easy as before to use fake documents to infiltrate maritime agencies, especially in Singapore, making it tougher to get pre-attack intelligence or to recruit accomplices among crews.

Some villages and dens of pirates have now also been reconnected with the economic and administrative centres through new infrastructures. For example, in the north of Tanjung Balai, on Karimun Island, near a small *pelabuhan tikus* ('mouse port' – or smuggling haven) from where pirates have launched attacks, local authorities have installed sewers, built a custom office and constructed a new, wider and asphalt road. This action is essential for the reintegration of idle people and isolated kampungs which are potential pirate haunts.

Consequently, some of the pirates choose to retrain as smugglers: For example, they import and export cigarettes from Kampung Tanjung in Belakang Padang or drugs from Tanjung Uma in Batam. The others prefer to relocate their criminal activities, either deeper into the south near the Berhala Strait or, seemingly, in Anambas Islands, especially near Keramat.

'Maritime Rear Guard' in Danger

The sleepy village of Keramat in the South China Sea is still cut off from economic and administrative centres. It takes about 18 hours from Bintan, near Batam in the Riau Archipelago, to reach it by ship and sampan. In this small kampung, one finds neither guesthouses, nor schools nor police stations.

Some gangs have set up their 'operational centres' in Keramat. This isolated place has the same characteristics as many *pelabuhan tikus*: natural shelter; absence of law enforcement agencies in particular, and other trappings of the Indonesian state in general; proximity with the Sea Lines Of Communications (SLOC); and local tolerance of the villagers. Take the example of Winang who led a gang in the nineties; this Chinese Singaporean offered drums and guitars to the inhabitants. Then, his pirates lived calmly among the fishermen and launched maritime raids from Mangkai, the nearest deserted island, as well as from Tokong Biru, described as a 'pirate meeting point'. The gang has now split up.

At present, new pirates are interested in Mangkai as a forward post along one of the busiest SLOC. The rare visitor will find young men who will show beaches on the other side of Keramat, opposite the

kampung and behind mangroves. Now, pirates prefer to anchor off these wild but quiet coasts.

In 2007, the closest navy station – around 30 kilometres to the south – sheltered only five troops, without any ships! More absurdly, these men even admitted to being afraid of the Sea Ghost. Due to these two unusual reasons, the Indonesian patrol boats rarely disturb the local sea robbers. More generally, the Navy focuses too much on the media-friendly Malacca Strait and forgets the surrounding zones.

The new pirates

Who are these new pirates who would operate from Anambas to the Tioman Islands, in Malaysia? There is a sense on the ground, based on fieldwork and informal interviews conducted, that the perpetrators could have come from Thailand. Such speculations are backed by the route taken by the tugboat Whale 7 that have been hijacked last September, off Tioman, not so far from Keramat, while it was towing a barge to Sattahip, in Thailand. It is possible that the pirates had intelligence about this journey because of Thai accomplices. Two weeks later, Thai marine police recovered the tugboat and the barge. Another tug sailing to Thailand was attacked between Tioman and Anambas on 1 December.

These criminals also have no connections with the villagers. Local fishermen are afraid of talking about these ‘foreign visitors’. Thus, Thai pirates would follow Thai fishermen who currently sail in Indonesian waters; two illegal fishing boats were scuttled off Mangkai by Indonesian authorities last December.

Time for South China Sea patrols?

While the Malacca Strait is increasingly safe to shipping after the successful naval operations by the littoral states, some chokepoints in the south of the Riau Islands and in the South China Sea continue to pose a danger. Waters near Mangkai are still described as a piracy-prone area in the 2008 Annual IMB Piracy Report. The annual report of ReCAAP (Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia) also focuses on this area. The shipping community has still to raise the alarm to regional forces stationed along the Malacca Strait.

The Indonesian Maritime Security Coordination Board (Bakorkamla) made an effort by carrying out Operation Gurita over 20 days last November. But the patrol boats were scattered from west to east, from Natuna Islands to the Arafura Sea near Papua. The duration of the operation was also too short. Indeed, the security of this area is crucial all year round. Ship masters of oil companies are looking for the safest route in Southeast Asia. If they cross either the Sunda or Malacca Strait, their vessels have to sail in the vicinity of Natuna or Anambas Islands.

The Malacca Strait patrols should be extended into the South China Sea. As Indonesia is cooperating with India in the vicinity of Andaman Islands in the west of the Strait, Jakarta should also collaborate more closely in the east with Malaysia and other states interested in the security of passage through this section of the South China Sea. The Indonesia-Malaysia General Border Committee (GBC Malindo) should pay close attention to transborder issues not only in the Malacca Strait or along the Kalimantan-Sarawak border but also between Tioman and Anambas.

Eric Frécon is a post-doctoral fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University where he serves on the Indonesia Programme (RSIS). He is writing a new book on the pirates of the Malacca Strait.