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SINGAPORE'S GULF ANTI-PIRACY OPERATIONS: A SHIFT IN STRATEGIC THINKING

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Singapore's decision to send a Landing Ship Tank for anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden under the US-led Combined Task Force 151 reveals pragmatism at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. It also signals a shift in strategic thinking to contribute to global security.

ON THURSDAY, 12 February 2009, Singapore's Defence Minister, Teo Chee Hean announced in Parliament that the Republic of Singapore Navy will join international efforts to tackle piracy and protect ships that sail through the Gulf of Aden. The Republic will send a Landing Ship Tank (LST) with two Super Puma helicopters and 200 personnel for a three-month tour of duty.

While in the Gulf, the LST will work with the US-led Combined Task Force (CTF) 151 and other navy ships to escort vessels that ply the waterway. Countries that have already sent ships to the area include the United States, European Union members like Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands and Spain as well as Turkey. Other warships have also been on scene and operate independently from the US-led group and the EU group. The countries include China, India, Russia, and Malaysia.

Ships from these countries are primarily tasked with escorting vessels of their own nationality through the waters in the Gulf of Aden. More ships are also being dispatched to the region. Recently, both Japan and South Korea have decided to send warships to the area and Australia is also considering sending warships to the Gulf.

Strategic Pragmatism

Singapore's decision to participate in the anti-piracy mission reveals a pragmatic side to its defence thinking at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. Firstly, at the strategic level, Singapore realises that the security of international sea lanes is vital to its national interests as it sits astride one of the major sea lanes of the world, the Malacca and Singapore Straits. Because of this, it needs to play its part in keeping sea lanes secure. As the Defence Minister has said: "It is not possible for any country, including Singapore, to protect its own shipping in all the key sea lanes of the world."

Singapore would therefore have to work in concert with its partners and friends to protect its shipping around the world. Closer to home, although efforts by the littoral countries under the auspices of the Malacca Straits Patrols have thus far been effective in reducing the incidents of piracy and armed robbery in this region, there is no guarantee that the situation might not spiral out of control in the future as in the case of the Gulf of Aden.

If that situation should arise, it would not be possible for Singapore or the other littoral states, to deal with the problem on their own, and it may be necessary then to engage the international community for assistance. Despite 14 attempts on them, none of Singapore-registered vessels have been hijacked or crew detained in the Gulf of Aden last year. Still, contributing now to an international effort which may not directly affect Singapore's shipping can build up goodwill and pave the way for a reciprocal commitment should the need arise in future.

Operational Pragmatism

Secondly, the operational decision by Singapore to join the US-led CTF 151, instead of operating independently, or waiting for a United Nations-led force to materialise, is a pragmatic one. CTF 151 was established in January 2009 to focus on the counter-piracy mission. It was a new direction adopted by the US as it had hitherto been reluctant to allocate its ships for the anti-piracy mission, which was viewed as not being a core interest. The US-led CTF 150, which also operates in the area, has no mandate for anti-piracy operations; it can only monitor, inspect, board, and stop suspect shipping in pursuit of anti-terrorism objectives in the Horn of Africa region.

Although anti-piracy operations were not within the mandate of CTF 150, some of its ships have been involved in anti-piracy operations on a case-by-case basis through individual national commitment rather than as part of a Combined Task Force. The CTF 151 was therefore created to provide a US-led command structure for ships in CTF 150 that are allowed to conduct anti-piracy operations. The CTF 151 is also to allow for the inclusion of nations willing to participate in US-led anti-piracy operations but who do not want to be involved in the anti-terrorism tasks of CTF 150.

By joining CTF 151, Singapore can ride on the bilateral agreements made by the US with the transitional government in Somalia as well as the government in Kenya where the pirates can be sent for prosecution. Singapore can also resort to the facilities of the civilian cargo ship, the USNS Lewis and Clark, that has been drafted by the US Navy and equipped to temporarily hold up to 26 captured piracy suspects. The use of such arrangements is critical as it would take a much longer time for apprehended pirates to be transferred to Singapore for prosecution.

Tactical Pragmatism

Thirdly, at the tactical level, the choice of sending an LST is appropriate. Normally, in combating a low-level threat such as piracy, the use of patrol vessels would suffice; the deployment of a frigate would be an overkill and an unnecessary use of resources. However, since the Gulf of Aden is such a long way from Singapore, the ability to sustain operations in the area is a major consideration for the deployment of the LST. Furthermore, the experience of navies operating in the region has shown that helicopter operations are an essential part of the anti-piracy effort and the LST can carry two Super Puma helicopters. The LST is also a versatile platform and can be used to provide logistical support to other ships operating in the area. All these factors make the LST the appropriate ship to be sent for the anti-piracy mission.

Shift in Strategic Thinking

Singapore's decision to participate in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden signals a shift in

strategic thinking. Previously, Singapore has been content to free-ride on international efforts when it has no direct interest in the operation, in contrast to its participation in counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan where it derives a direct benefit. Now, Singapore recognises that it has a part to play to secure international sea lanes and contribute to global security.

Implicitly, it also recognises that there might come a time where an international effort might be required to deal with security challenges in our region. Contributing to global security now will pave the way for a reciprocal international commitment in the future should the need arise.

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