

Shipping in South-East Asia

Going for the jugular

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The Strait of Malacca, through which a quarter of the world's maritime trade passes, makes a tempting target for terrorists and pirates

FACING west from Singapore's shores, it is hard to make out the Strait of Malacca, thanks to all the boats and islands scattered across the water. An endless procession of tankers, container ships, tugs, fishing boats, ferries and cruise-liners sails between tiny islets, through a shipping lane that narrows to as little as one and a half nautical miles at one point. Some 50,000 vessels, carrying roughly a quarter of the world's maritime trade, pass through the strait every year. So do about half of all seaborne oil shipments, on which the economies of Japan, China and South Korea depend. If terrorists were determined to devastate the world economy, it would be hard to find a better target.

So, at any rate, reasoned many of the participants at the Shangri-La Dialogue, a regional security conference organised by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore last week. Tony Tan, Singapore's deputy prime minister, pointed out that a ship sunk in the right spot, where the sea lane is only 25m deep, "would cripple world trade". He also raised the possibility of hijacked ships being turned into "floating bombs" and crashed into critical infrastructure such as oil refineries or ports. Donald Rumsfeld, America's secretary of defence, stopped in at the conference to push the "regional maritime security initiative", whereby America would help South-East Asian countries defend against such attacks.

Maritime terrorism is certainly not unheard of. Muslim militants in Yemen blew a hole in an American warship, the *Cole*, in 2000, and another in a French oil tanker, the *Limburg*, in 2002. The same year, authorities in Morocco arrested a group of suspected terrorists planning attacks on British and American naval ships in the Strait of Gibraltar. Abu Sayyaf, a terrorist outfit from the southern Philippines, claimed responsibility for bombing a ferry in Manila Bay earlier this year.

But the evidence that terrorists are targeting shipping in the Strait of Malacca remains fairly flimsy. In 2001, American forces in Afghanistan found a video tracking the movements of Malaysian naval vessels. Singaporean authorities say they have arrested terrorist suspects who confessed to planning an attack on visiting American ships, among other potential targets. Some Singaporean officials also make much of a puzzling hijacking earlier this year, when pirates seized a chemical tanker in the strait, and abandoned ship after an hour. The incident might, they postulate, have been a dummy run for a future floating bomb attack.



Source: International Maritime Organisation

On the other hand, the pervasiveness of piracy in the area proves that shipping is vulnerable to less apocalyptic assaults. The Strait of Malacca and its littoral countries account for about a third of all pirate attacks in the world. The number of such attacks has tripled over the past decade (see chart). In the first week of June, for example, a tug and barge disappeared on their way to Port Klang in Malaysia, armed robbers looted a tanker in Indonesian waters, and crews repelled two other attacks in the strait itself.

Analysts attribute this increase in piracy to ordinary Indonesians impoverished by the financial crisis of 1997, or rebels from the restive province of Aceh, at the northern end of the strait. They tend to loot smaller ships for valuables, or hold their crews for ransom. But there are also more sophisticated pirates, who steal whole tankers and their cargoes to order, and who might be recruited by terrorists.

At the moment, the strait is relatively poorly monitored, especially north of Port Klang, where the sea lanes widen. The cash-strapped Indonesian navy has perhaps 20 seaworthy patrol boats, to guard an archipelago of 17,000 islands. Singapore and Malaysia are richer and better equipped, but have no right to pursue ships into Indonesian waters. Singaporean sailors say that when they pass information to their Indonesian counterparts, it disappears into a black hole.

Malaysia and Indonesia have already rejected the idea of American patrols in the strait or rapid-response units at the ready, both out of prickliness about sovereignty and for fear of inflaming anti-American feelings among their citizens. But they say they would accept American help in the form of advice, equipment and training. The International Maritime Organisation, the United Nations body that regulates shipping, has ruled that all vessels over 300 tonnes must install a tracking system by the end of the year.

Thailand, meanwhile, has come up with a scheme to bypass the Strait of Malacca altogether. The government originally toyed with the idea of building a canal through the narrow Isthmus of Kra, which would cut over 1,000km (620 miles) off the sea route from the Middle East to Japan. But, now, it is pushing a cheaper alternative: a "land bridge" consisting of oil and cargo terminals on either side of the isthmus, connected by pipelines, roads and railways. In addition to the benefits in terms of security, the scheme could cut between 40 and 60 cents per barrel off the cost of shipping oil to East Asia. A sensible enough idea—were it not for the fact that southern Thailand is grappling with terrorist troubles of its own.

