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Ship Security Alert System:
A failed effort to protect coastal communities

Thomas Timlen

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Merchant ships are now equipped with alert systems intended to prevent acts of terrorism. However, local authorities may be alerted too late to take effective action. Several steps can be taken to tackle the flaws in the current ship security alert system.

ONE OF the globally-applied measures to prevent the use of merchant ships in acts of terrorism seems on course to have little if any effect. Indeed, unless corrective measures are taken, it will have been a complete waste of resources.

All merchant ships are now required to have ship security alert systems on board as a consequence of amendments made to the International Maritime Organisation's Safety of Life at Sea Convention. This requirement was one of many introduced after the terrorist acts against the United States on 11 September 2001.

Slow response

Whilst many resources, time and money were used in the development of these alert systems, unfortunately this effort will not achieve the desired goal of preventing acts of terrorism involving merchant ships. The reason for this failure is that the response mechanisms are simply too slow.

If experience has taught us anything about terrorism, it is that the attacks are swift and deadly, come with little or no warning, and rely on a significant element of surprise. This is illustrated well by the September 11 attacks.

Flight 11 crashed into the Northern Tower of the World Trade Centre only 47 minutes after taking off from Boston's Logan Airport, and only 27 minutes after a flight attendant on board warned her colleagues on the ground of the hijacking. The only effective measures taken to thwart the terrorists' plans were initiated by civilians on board Flight 93, resulting with the plane crashing in Pennsylvania, far from its intended target. Otherwise the only measures taken to mitigate loss of life were the

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evacuations that commenced *after* Flight 11 crashed into the World Trade Centre.

The attacks of September 11 were unlike most terrorist attacks in that there was some time, short as it was, before impact. In most cases, such as the London Underground and Bali bombings, there is no warning at all.

This reality should make it obvious that priority must be given to alerting the actual responders to such acts as quickly as possible, and as soon as it is known that an act of terrorism is imminent or underway. If there is to be any chance of stopping such acts, every second is critical. This is where ship security alert systems fail.

Achilles heel of ship alert system

The weakness of these ship security alert systems is that the nearby responders to such threats are not the initial parties alerted. Instead, ship security alerts take serpentine routes amongst many parties before anyone in the immediate vicinity is alerted of the threat.

When the regulations were being formulated at the International Maritime Organisation, it was decided that the alert should be silent, and that it should not be received by the coastal authorities in the vicinity of the ship or by any other ships, naval or merchant. The initial recipient is the ship's Flag State, or an authority designated by the Flag State, which in practice is usually the ship owner.

Merchant shipping is a truly global industry. Merchant ships navigate far from their home ports, and their owners are often situated in countries equally far from the ships' trading areas. Therefore, it is probable that a ship security alert will be received by a ship owner or Flag State thousands of miles removed from the scene of the potential security threat, leaving everyone nearby completely unaware of the potential danger.

Troubling, to say the least, and there are still more reasons for concern.

Since the introduction of ship security alert systems there have been ongoing problems with false alerts being sent. As a result, many flag states require that the ship owner must verify that the alert is real before any steps by the Flag State to mobilize a response are taken. Will a response be set in motion once the alert is verified? Not exactly.

The procedures that Flag States have in place to manage confirmed security alerts vary significantly. However, none involve the immediate deployment of response forces.

First meetings are called involving various government agencies and possibly the shipowner. These meetings will involve discussions aimed at determining what to do under the circumstances, including when, how and whether to inform the Coastal States in the ship's vicinity. In the meantime, the Coastal State can do nothing until it is informed of the threat.

Whilst such procedures may have been developed with the best of intentions, the grim reality is that they introduce too many layers of verification, evaluation, and decision-making, making a rapid response virtually impossible.

Ways to improve the system

Fortunately there are ways to improve the system.

Firstly, ensure that the authorities nearby are immediately informed. This will enable them to swiftly mobilise their response forces, potentially neutralising the terrorists and preventing attacks, and

providing the opportunity for the evacuation of the nearby population. Evacuation is clearly of utmost importance if the ship involved is situated near a densely populated oceanfront or harbour city.

Secondly, enable the alert systems to notify ships in the vicinity of the threat. This would provide these ships with an opportunity to also take actions aimed at either preventing the attack (like the civilians on board Flight 93), or to evacuate from the area. The captain of a large passenger ship would likely choose the latter option.

Thirdly, change the alert from a 'silent alarm' to a blaring loud overt alarm. Whilst there may have been good arguments made to take the silent alarm approach, this can also be seen as a huge disadvantage since only the person who activated the alarm would know that a security threat existed. No one else on board or nearby would have an opportunity to either try to prevent the attack or to evacuate the area. The terrorists are simply given more time with no resistance.

These are only a few suggestions. There are other concerns begging for attention. For example, the high frequency of false alerts must be addressed. This problem can be tackled in several ways, such as redesigning the security alert system equipment; enhanced training of seafarers in the use of the systems; and restricting the use of the systems to situations of imminent attacks of a severe nature.

In short, the arrangements currently in place might be sufficient for alerts sent from a ship on the high seas far from coastal populations. But they are useless if activated to prevent an attack on a ship in the control of terrorists about to launch an attack in or near a heavily populated coastal city.

Thomas Timlen was until recently a Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. He was also Head of the Baltic and International Maritime Council's (BIMCO) Security and International Affairs Department until August 2007. He represented BIMCO at the International Maritime Organisation during the development of the SOLAS International Ship and Port Facility Security Code and other amendments to the convention that included the Ship Security Alert System requirement. He was also responsible for maritime security issues such as terrorism, drug smuggling, stowaways, illegal migration, piracy and armed attacks against ships, war risks and fraud and extortion.