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Terrorist Threats from the Maritime Domain: Singapore's Response

By Joseph Franco and Romain Quivooij

Synopsis

Terrorist threats from the maritime domain are a recurring challenge around South and Southeast Asia even prior to the emergence of actors such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Singapore's position as a hub for maritime trade and industries has required distinct initiatives to mitigate potential threats by terrorist organisations.

Commentary

The Islamic State's successes in Iraq and Syria appear to have inspired resurgence among other jihadist groups. Al Qaeda Central sought to reassert its authority with the 'Organisation of The Base of Jihad in the Indian Sub-Continent' (AQIS) made public by Ayman al-Zawahiri on 3 September 2014. The genesis of AQIS, while a competitive response to the rise of IS in the global jihadist movement, is also an outgrowth of Al Qaeda's long-term ambitions for expansion in South Asia since the early 2000s.

Al-Zawahiri's pronouncement was followed three days later by a failed attack on a Pakistani naval frigate in Karachi for which the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the recently formed AQIS both claimed responsibility. The attack involved AQIS fighters who were former Pakistani naval officers, who sought to hijack the Pakistani frigate PNS Zulfiqar to launch missiles at US Navy vessels in the Indian Ocean. Local media reported that the attackers had pre-positioned their weapons in lockers on the dock, and these were used to take control of Zulfiqar. Looking beyond the AQIS tactics, the Karachi attack also demonstrated how maritime assets can be an attractive target for groups seeking to demonstrate their resolve.

Current threats from Southeast Asia's maritime domain

Southeast Asian states are no strangers to terrorism-related incidents either emanating from or exploiting the maritime domain. The innate predisposition to use the seas as an attack vector has long been significant among terrorist groups based in Southeast Asia, quite apart from the influence of extra-regional attack tactics. For example, the coast of Eastern Sabah, Malaysia, has been recently experiencing a spike in kidnappings attributed to the Mindanao-based Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG).

Violence in the maritime region bracketed by Mindanao, Borneo, and Sulawesi existed long before Islamist militants. The cross-border raids result from the combination of various dysfunctions such as loose border controls and illicit small arms proliferation in Mindanao.

The recent arrests of 19 IS-associated militants in Peninsular Malaysia further underscore the salience of the maritime domain for attack planning. One Sri Lankan suspect who was arrested reportedly had experience in human trafficking. He was believed to have been involved in a plot to transport two militants from the Maldives via small boat to the coastal state of Kerala in southern India to attack the US and Israel consulates further inland in Chennai and Bangalore.

Recent Singaporean responses to the potential threats

Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, in response to a recent question in Parliament on how Singapore enhances its maritime security, explained that the country's maritime security agencies have adopted a "co-ordinated and multi-layered security regime". Terrorist threats to maritime security, including those that straddle both land and maritime domains, illumine the rationale for the setting up of agencies like the Singapore Maritime Crisis Centre (SMCC).

Recently, the SMCC through its National Maritime Sense-making Group (NMSG) detected an individual who was listed as a crew member on two different vessels intending to enter Singapore on the same day. In light of the alleged plot by the IS-associated Sri Lankan, this crew anomaly could well have been a precursor to a terrorist-related attack, or an attempt to infiltrate Singapore's territorial waters. NMSG immediately shared this information with the appropriate maritime security agency, which went on to undertake regulatory actions against the shipping agent involved.

This incident highlights the importance of a proactive stance of agencies like the SMCC to detect threats as early and as far away from Singapore as possible, and to coordinate operational responses to deter and prevent an attack from occurring. This critical task cannot be overstated, given the importance of sea-borne trade to Singapore.

SMCC, established in 2011 as a whole-of-government (WOG) entity, draws upon the expertise of its national maritime security partner agencies. The SMCC makes possible through its sense-making systems a national maritime common operating picture that is shared by the five maritime security partners and related national security agencies. This allows threat assessments to be harmonised across agencies and operational responses to be coordinated.

SMCC's WOG activities fit in well with the broader effort by the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) to enhance inter-service and inter-agency collaboration and interoperability. The ninth instalment of Exercise APEX will be held next month and involve more than 1,000 personnel from across the national maritime security agencies. These agencies, along with their maritime assets and vessels, will exercise multiple scenarios related to the terrorist threat.

In sum, efforts by both WOG and community (i.e. shipping agencies) to deter and prevent the maritime terrorist threat demonstrates the necessity for Singapore to harness the power of all relevant stakeholders to deny terrorists the operating space to launch attacks against or through the maritime domain. Given the borderless, networked nature of the threat, a co-ordinated networked response is fully warranted.

This commentary is a research collaboration between the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) and the National Maritime Sense-Making Group (NMSG), a component of the Singapore Maritime Crisis Centre (SMCC). Joseph Franco and Romain Quivooij are Associate Research Fellows with CENS at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.