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MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE MALACCA STRAITS: Prospects and Limits

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The announcement by the Indonesian Navy Chief Admiral Bernard Sondakh on 29 June 04 that he and his Malaysian counterpart have agreed to institute some form of ‘joint’ patrols of the Malacca Straits, along with Singapore, represents a major step forward in settling the controversy over a regional maritime security initiative for the waterway. The three littoral states would now step up measures to counter the threat of maritime terrorism as well as piracy.

According to the Indonesian Admiral they would deploy up to seven naval vessels each and a form a task force of security personnel which would patrol the straits in a coordinated manner, but operate under their respective national commands. Military officials of the three countries would meet soon to work out the arrangements for the combined patrols to be carried out all year round, up from the four yearly patrols they had been conducting along the straits.

Acknowledging that this falls short of the “joint patrols” he had proposed with Singapore, Admiral Sondakh said he did not rule out in future a joint force for the patrols, based in Belawan, North Sumatra; Lumut, Malaysia; and Singapore. He also said cooperation with other countries including the United States, was possible, but would be limited to the sharing of intelligence and training exercises. Southeast Asian littoral states had initially rebuffed an American proposal to help patrol the Malacca Straits. As the Malaysian Navy chief, Admiral Mohd Anwar Nor explained: “We don’t want outside forces having a role in the Straits of Malacca.”

The latest move by Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore is seen as a coordinated response to international calls to step up security amid increasing piracy attacks in the straits and the threat of terrorist attacks against major seaports using hijacked ships.

It appears however that the mode of the security cooperation among the three states will be coordinated patrols (like the current arrangements between Indonesia and Singapore, and Indonesia and Malaysia) rather than joint patrols involving all three naval forces, for now. Such coordinated patrols get round the sensitivities of the littoral states especially over the question of sovereignty. As Admiral Sondakh stated: “...maybe some day we will do this joint patrols but not for now because every country has its own policy.”

This commentary discusses the prospects and limitations to maritime security cooperation among the littoral states in the near term. It will also consider how other powers can play a role in supporting regional cooperative efforts. Finally it will suggest how sustained regional cooperation in maritime security can be achieved in respect of the Malacca Straits.

Prospects for cooperation

Prospects for regional maritime security cooperation have improved now that defence ministers and officials of Southeast Asian states recognise the need for some measures to be taken to increase security of shipping through the Straits of Malacca. They however emphasise that the impetus for any regional security initiative must come from within the region. Extra regional powers like the United States and Japan cannot drive these cooperative efforts, though they can help to underwrite them with technical assistance, resources and training.

Besides the issue of sovereignty, the rationale for keeping such an initiative regional is four-fold: Firstly, the Malacca Straits is a waterway that lies between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Should there be a major collision along the straits the environment of these littoral states will be immediately and severely affected. Secondly, the Malacca Straits is the economic lifeline for the three littoral states besides serving global trade and the flow of half the world's crude oil. Thirdly, both Malaysia and Indonesia have expressed their sensitivities about outside powers deploying their security forces to patrol the Malacca Straits. Apart from the issue of sovereignty they assert that the foreign forces would not have the local knowledge or familiarity with local culture to deal with the regional threats. Hence any external help must be in consultation with littoral states and their acceptance. Finally, it is easier for the littoral states to coordinate patrols of the Malacca Straits since their navies already have cooperation and joint exercises with one another and are familiar with the regional waters and coastlines.

Limits to cooperation

However there are some limits to regional cooperation in maritime security, for now. Firstly, the littoral states have yet to agree on the exact form and scope of such cooperation. While such regional cooperation would be driven by the littoral states, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, they also need the assistance of external powers to share intelligence, provide training and resources. The external powers have to play a supporting role. The Chief of the US Pacific Command Admiral Thomas Fargo now seems agreeable to a role for US naval forces that involves cooperation with the littoral states rather than direct intervention in the straits.

While both Malaysia and Indonesia have rejected the participation of external forces Singapore, on the other hand, has stressed the need for maritime powers like Japan, South Korea and United States (which have a stake in the safety of the waterway), as well as international bodies like the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and shipping communities, to be involved. Indonesia along with Malaysia (and Thailand) said that any help from external powers such as the United States would be limited to intelligence sharing, training and equipment.

Steps to joint patrols

The littoral states could take the following initial steps in building regional cooperation. First, they could start to have more information exchange at the working level among their maritime and security officials. This exchange of information would serve to build and increase confidence among the different agencies of the littoral states that oversee maritime security.

Next they could extend their cooperation to physical activities such as linking up the

maritime search and rescue coordination and operational centres of the three states. This would facilitate the coordination of patrols by their navies or coast guards. After this is achieved external powers could get involved by providing resources, training and intelligence sharing. It's only when the littoral states are comfortable with the working relationship among themselves that external help would be accepted.

The final phase is to have joint patrols by the naval forces of the littoral states, aided by intelligence from both their own security agencies and external sources. The littoral states would then be driving the regional maritime security cooperation but with the assistance of the international maritime community, without any fear of compromising their sovereignty.

Concerns and challenges

The question is how quickly and how effectively the littoral states come to grips with the urgent need to effect such regional cooperation before the international community feels obliged to act, either multilaterally through the IMO or unilaterally to protect their shipping through the Straits of Malacca, regardless of the sensitivities of the littoral states.

Another concern is whether the littoral states have the resources, such as sufficient navy vessels, to contribute to this 'joint' patrols. Malaysia is forming a special coast guard and beefing up its navy while Singapore has a fleet of corvettes and other high speed vessels; but Indonesia's capability is not clear. One way around it as suggested by the Director of ICC-International Maritime Bureau is for navy officers from the three littoral states to be aboard vessels of another country, as this would facilitate clearance to conduct 'hot pursuits' into the territorial waters of another country as well as "soften" the issue of sovereignty.

Yet another concern is the effectiveness of such 'joint' patrols. The question is will such joint patrols succeed in deterring maritime threats such as piracy and terrorism. The answer to that is probably yes, judging from the effectiveness of bilateral co-ordinated patrols such as the Indo-Singa Co-ordinated Patrols (ISCP) by Indonesia and Singapore to counter piracy in the straits between the two countries. . Moreover, showing one's presence can be an effective deterrent to would be terrorists and pirates.

However, the greatest challenge will be the political will of the three littoral states. If any of the national governments of the three littoral states is unable to sustain the momentum of putting maritime security and co-operation high on their respective political agenda, then talk of 'joint' patrols would just be a flash in the pan. Thus it would be in everyone's interest to encourage and support the littoral states to pursue their regional maritime security cooperation with all despatch.

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