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Somalia-type Piracy:

Why it will not happen in Southeast Asia

Sam Bateman and Joshua Ho

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The world has been shocked by the recent spate of piracy attacks off Somalia. Inevitably there has been speculation that sea robbers in Southeast Asia might imitate these attacks. However, there are good reasons why this will not occur.

ON 15 November 2008, the international maritime community was shocked by the hijacking of the very large crude oil carrier (VLCC) *Sirius Star* by Somali pirates off the East African coast. While the full circumstances of the incident are not known, it appears the attack took place much further south than previous attacks in this area. The vessel was then taken into Somali territorial waters while the pirates negotiated a ransom for the release of the ship and her crew.

Unprecedented piracy

The *Sirius Star* incident is the most serious attack off Somalia so far. Generally the number of attacks in the area has surged dramatically during 2008, but they have been on smaller and usually slower vessels.

Attacking a vessel as large as a VLCC is extremely difficult. Such a vessel gains considerable security from small boat attacks because of its size and speed. Travelling at normal operating speed, this size of vessel creates a huge bow wave and pressure and suction points along her hull, which impede a small craft trying to get alongside. It is only when the ship slows down or stops that she becomes fully vulnerable.

Somali pirates regularly fire rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers and machine guns to induce a ship to slow down. This may have been the case with the *Sirius Star*, but RPGs are relatively puny weapons against a large vessel and there is little risk of setting fire to a crude oil cargo. Perhaps the pirates used some other ruse to persuade the ship to slow down, such as a false distress call, or alternatively, the ship may have stopped or slowed down for engine repairs.

The piracy situation off Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden is distinctly different from that in the

Malacca Strait or in Southeast Asia. It is hard to argue that there is a risk that Southeast Asian sea robbers could try to imitate the actions of the Somali pirates and hijack a large vessel for ransom. There are three main reasons for this assessment.

Disorder on Land

The first reason is that Somali pirates can get away with their actions because they are operating off a lawless land. Good order at sea begins with good order on land. If there is disorder on land, then disorder in adjacent sea areas is likely. That is the situation now around Somalia. The pirates are well supported by infrastructure on land. While just ten or so pirates might actually conduct an attack, they subsequently have the assistance of many more people, in fact whole villages, to help guard a hijacked ship and look after her crew. All share in the spoils.

With the possible exception of some parts of the southern Philippines, this type of lawlessness or community support for pirate activity does not exist in Southeast Asia. There is nowhere to take a large ship and protect it from recovery. Regional countries have also increased their law enforcement efforts onshore to eliminate land enclaves of pirates. This has been a significant factor leading to a fall in the number of attacks in Southeast Asia in recent years.

Geography

Geography is a second area of difference. Southeast Asian waters are relatively confined while the Somali pirates operate in wide expanses of open ocean, using “mother ships” to support small craft operations. Southeast Asian waters with many small islands and narrow shipping lanes may be suitable for the “hit and run” attacks that occur in the region, but they are unsuited for the type of operations conducted by Somali pirates. Paradoxically, it is much easier to hide on open ocean than it is in littoral waters.

The coalition of naval forces engaged in counter-piracy operations off Somalia should have access to good surveillance information, or what the Americans call “maritime domain awareness”. However, good surveillance is only half the game. There is still the need to have sufficient response forces to provide a reasonable probability of intercepting, identifying and if necessary, boarding a suspicious vessel. Lack of adequate surface forces to undertake these tasks is a major problem off Somalia.

Types of Attack

The last reason why Somalia-type attacks are unlikely in Southeast Asia is that the modus operandi of pirates and sea robbers in the two areas are very different. Attacks off Somalia are brazen, usually conducted in daylight with the overt display of weaponry to intimidate the target vessel and its crew. In contrast, attacks in Southeast Asian waters are mostly made secretly under cover of darkness with the robbers boarding to steal whatever valuables they can. Most attacks are also on vessels at anchor or in port where security may be lax.

Somali pirates are well-armed and organised with automatic weapons and RPGs, and the ability to operate far offshore. They sometimes operate more than 200 nautical miles to sea, using mother ships. In contrast, pirates in Southeast Asia are less organised, being generally small-time robbers and petty criminals conducting opportunistic raids. Their range of operations is limited. Firearms are not often used and the weapons of choice are generally knives and machetes.

While the number of attacks in Southeast Asia continues to fall, “hit and run” attacks on ship underway have occurred during 2008 near Pulau Tioman in Malaysian waters, near Anambas and Natuna islands in the South China Sea, and off the Riau archipelago in Indonesia. In a recent incident, the tug *Whale 7* and its barge were hijacked off Pulau Tioman, and their crews put ashore. The tug was subsequently recovered sailing under another name.

The use of a false identity is more possible with a smaller vessel because such vessels are not required

to have a ship identification number or continuous synoptic record under the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code. That code has been effective in reducing the incidence of “phantom ships”, but this does not help the situation off Somalia where ships are stolen for ransom rather than for their cargo and further trading.

Implications for Southeast Asia

While Somalia-type attacks may be unlikely in Southeast Asia, these attacks still have implications for the region. Regional countries are leading trading, ship-owning and seafarer-providing nations with a keen interest in safety and security at sea. Attacks have occurred on Singapore-flagged ships, but one managed to escape due to bold evasive movements.

Insurance rates on shipping passing off Somalia and through the Gulf of Aden have risen. This affects both Southeast Asian shipowners and the shipping costs of trade between Southeast Asia and Europe as well as with parts of the Middle East. Some trade is already being rerouted around the Cape of Good Hope, adding about 15 days to the sailing time from East Asia. The extra costs will accentuate pressures already being felt by regional exporters.

The net effect of the Somali piracies is that Southeast Asian navies may also become involved in counter-piracy operations off Somalia. To demonstrate commitment in ensuring the security of critical sealanes, regional countries, where able, should participate in international efforts currently underway off Somalia.

The Royal Malaysian Navy has already undertaken missions there associated with the recovery of hijacked Malaysian-flag vessels. Singapore might also become involved, and the Formidable-class frigates now provide the Singapore Government with an excellent option to provide an effective contribution to the multinational counter-piracy operations off Somalia.

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