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Pre-empting Maritime Terrorism in Southeast Asia

Graham Gerard Ong

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The two-week long Diplomatic Conference on Maritime Security later this week by the International Maritime Organisation, the United Nation's specialised agency responsible for improving maritime safety, cannot be more timely. There is increasing evidence that al-Qaeda's terrorist network has taken sail through their attacks on ships worldwide. States authorities have to do more than formulate programmes and policies. They have to be creative in the bid to outsmart terrorism.

Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have a crucial interest, by virtue of their maritime geography, in seeing that maritime terrorism is kept at bay. Terrorism expert David Claridge of Janusian Securities believes that the Bali attack on 12 October 2002 is a declaration of war on the global economy. According to him, "It has started to shift its strategy towards economic targets". Taped statements by two top leaders of al-Qaeda have also alluded to attacks on "economic lifelines", which immediately refer to commercial shipping lanes as an avenue. If we clarify Claridge's reading of the Bali attack more acutely, then the sub-text woven in between the main message becomes apparent: *we will take to the waters; your ships will not be safe at port or sea.*

Coincidentally or not, the Bali attack coincided with the second anniversary of al-Qaeda's devastating assault on the USS Cole at a port in Yemen in October 2000. The month of October this year also marks the 17th Anniversary of the 1985 hijacking of an Italian cruise ship, holding 511 passengers and crew, by the Palestinian Liberation Front, a constituent part of Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organisation. The suicide bombing of a French-flagged ship, the *Limburg*, off Yemen on 6 October 2002 serves as additional forewarning.

In a recent discovery of a collection of poems written in classical Arabic by supporters of al-Qaeda meant for public distribution, one piece signed by Muktar Said hails the attack on the USS Cole. He writes: "Nothing will cause them weighty harm...except if their heads are shorn off and scattered about." He urges other young men to follow the path of those "who plunged into the seas steadfastly".

The sudden spate of terrorist plots on ships in Southeast Asia by intelligence sources temper symbolism and verse with a significant degree of reality. According to them, the masterminds of the USS Cole actually planned another attack on a US ship visiting a Malaysian port in 2000. Earlier this year, Singapore intelligence disrupted an al-Qaeda plot to attack a US ship here. Senior al-Qaeda operative, Omar al-Faruq, who is now in US custody, also told officials of plans to attack an American naval ship in Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest port.

Al-Faruq's warning should be taken seriously. He is now known to have helped al-Qaeda form alliances with militant Islamic groups operating in the region such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines, the Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia and both Laskar Jihad and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia. In fact, Al-Faruq set up the first Southeast Asian al-Qaeda training camp in the Philippines before establishing another in Poso, Sulawesi. By working closely with Hambali, JI's head of operations, and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, head of the Indonesian Mujahiddin Council, Al-Faruq has helped carry out bombing attacks in the region since the end of 2000.

The attempts against US ships so far should not belie us into believing that the United States and its military is the sole target of al-Qaeda's maritime operations. Any state or organisation seen to be supporting the foreign policies of the Western powers is deemed a target. Participation in the global economy, which is seen to privilege the developed West, places all the states in maritime Southeast Asia on al-Qaeda's hit list.

The utility of maritime attacks in Southeast Asia and, critically, in the Malacca Strait, the jugular of the region's maritime trade, is unmistakable. The Strait is a highly strategic sea-lane that handles voluminous amounts of regional import and export cargo as well as 80 percent of Japan's oil. Between 150 to as much as 900 ships pass through this strait daily. Singapore's harbour as the world's busiest transit port sits on this strait as a key hub in the global economic lifeline. The implications on regional tourism and the economy are extremely stark.

However, what is significantly interesting with regards to maritime terrorism in the region is the fact that all such attempts thus far have failed. There may be various reasons explaining their lack of achievement. Most probable among them is the lack of expertise in getting it right. While al-Qaeda may have the material resources to conduct maritime attacks, they do not necessarily possess the skills in maritime craft and seafaring. The September 11 attacks were successful largely because the perpetrators were trained as skilled airline pilots. They had to patiently undergo training in different commercial flying schools in the West.

Regional authorities should not exclude an engendering nexus between terrorism and another activity that has devastating impact on maritime trade: piracy. It makes sense in the terrorists' drive for maritime expertise. Cooperation between these two groups is also rational in terms of mutual gain. While a separate issue from Islamic terrorism, the case of Acehese rebels financing their activities through piracy substantiates the basis for mutual gain between terrorists and pirates as in this case.

The synergy between terrorism and piracy will increase the probability of success for a terror attack on a targeted ship. According to the International Maritime Bureau and International Chamber of Commerce, pirates have carried out 20 successful attacks and hijackings along the Malacca Strait and 72 such activities around Indonesia between January 1 to September 30 of this year alone. This trend is apparent to al-Qaeda and militant Islamic groups in the region. The

next step would be for militant Islamic groups to recruit pirate syndicates in Malaysia and Indonesia under their fold provided that the social and religious profile of latter proves suitable.

In the end, even if terrorists decide to go it alone, technology will arbitrate the prospect for further failure. According to Vijay Sakhuja, a maritime security analyst, dual-use technologies such as the Global Positioning System (GPS), satellite communications systems, sea sport scooters, scuba diving equipment and mini-submarines are either being added to the inventory list of maritime terrorists or will be done so in the near future.

These items are within al-Qaeda's purchasing power. Already, terrorists are going beyond the crude employment of an explosive loaded speedboat to the use of long-range rocket launchers and armour piercing weapons. If terrorists choose to employ the help and knowledge of pirates on top of their own resources, the effect will be even more devastating.

The recent recommendation by the International Maritime Bureau of using an anti-boarding system involving a 9,000 volt, non-lethal, electric surrounding a ship should be regarded as a last line of defence against piracy and maritime terrorism. The same applies to the use of military vessels to escort large commercial ships in regional waters and the intensification of coast guard patrols. The battle against maritime terrorism and piracy must extend beyond the *Materialschlacht* or the battle of materials.

It must be fought in the battle for information. In addition to drug trafficking, organised crime and piracy, maritime terrorism should cease to be regarded as 'grey-area phenomena', often defined as threats to the stability of sovereign states by non-state actors. The grey has long been apparent and embellishes these activities as non-issues against those of a higher profile. Instead, these sets of inter-locking problems should be noted for the 'black box' that continues to occupy the landscape of information on piracy and other organised crime.

The IMO conference would do well by tackling threats to maritime security both conceptually and operationally. First, it would do well to re-classify piracy under maritime terrorism. This would ratchet the threat of an age-old criminal activity into a core security issue. While the two activities run on different aims, they share a similar medium for action and create significant impact on political and economic stability.

Secondly, the fight against piracy should become the point of entry in the fight against maritime terrorism as both activities are carried out through similar media and tactics. This avoids duplicity in formulating counteractive strategies and the use of resources. The conference must also go beyond current security initiatives at sea by developing those on land. There is an imperative need to enhance the cooperative efforts between military, police and security and intelligence agencies across ASEAN and to minimise duplicity in the collection of intelligence.

The intelligence community would also do well to move beyond logic as the calculus in uncovering the next move of terrorists. A stronger grounding of culture and history with the power of imagination can serve as bridge to prevailing information gaps. Yet, as long as analysts and officials hold on to conventional assumptions about the next step terrorists will take, they will continue to be stumped. Amidst the heat of speculation about how Osama bin Laden would flee Afghanistan, no one suspected that he would utilise his strong family links with the tribesmen of the Hadhra Maug to assist him in his journey towards Yemen by traditional dhow across the Arabian Sea. They were obviously a means of transport too uninteresting to receive notice by intelligence agencies.

Like the roots of a tree, al-Qaeda's cultural pedigree and those of the MILF, Laskar Jihad and Jemaah Islamiyah extend deep into historical obscurity in a web of associations. On a seemingly separate plane, piracy has had an entrenched existence in the region for the past few centuries. Historian Nicholas Tarling in the late 1970s argued that regional piracy of the past was more than mere banditry. From his observation of the events of nineteenth century Southeast Asia, piracy crystallised as a result of the "commercial revolution" that came along with British imperialism. It disrupted traditional economic structures and locked social groups out of the new economy. Though economically motivated, piracy stemmed from political disenfranchisement. Though crude, this may provide the ground for exploitation by al-Qaeda and militant Islamic groups in the region. The point here is that all possible avenues and links must be explored with nothing left to chance by analysts.

Meanwhile, the battle between states and terrorists will continue to be a battle of mistakes. The success of a hijacking operation or terrorist attack is our mistake. Our success in foiling these attempts is theirs. Yet, victory cannot be a matter of who stands on the winning side of a balance sheet. With each and every success and mistake, terrorists are presented with the opportunity to hone their skills for their next attempt. They gain a martyr for each effort. Every attempt is a loss for states because the crux of security operates on pre-emption. The safest gauge for success for states is one that increases the margin between the initial intention of terrorists and their execution of a plan.

For the moment, to use Sakhuja words, Southeast Asia's 'maritime infrastructure' will continue to be 'the soft belly of states that can be attacked with little effort'. An attack to the belly is enough to cause the strongest of men to keel over in incapacitation and defeat.

The writer is a Research Associate at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. An edited version of this paper was published in The Straits Times on 2 December 2002 under the title "Taking the fight against terrorism to the high seas".