HOMELAND DEFENCE CITY-STATES

Royal Australian Navy personnel man a 12.7mm HMG onboard HMAS ANZAC during Exercise "Bersama Lima 04" in mid-September 2004. This was the first FPDA (Five Power Defence Agreement) exercise to address the capacity to deal with non-conventional threats, a nd it involved 3,500 personnel and 31 warships from five nations.
(Photo: Royal Australian Navy / LSPH Brad Fullerton)

Dire Straits

Piracy and Maritime Terror in Southeast Asia

Since late 2003, the security of shipping in Southeast Asian ports and waters, particularly in the Malacca and Singapore Straits, has emerged as a key concern for countries in and outside the region.

Despite growing anxiety over the level of maritime crime in the region, and the potentially devastating impact of maritime terrorism (demonstrated when suicide bombers struck the destroyer USS COLE in the Port of Aden in 2000 and the French oil tanker LIMBURG in the Gulf of Aden in 2002), US proposals for a Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI) have provoked controversy amongst Southeast Asian governments. Nevertheless, discussion of the issue at the "Shangri-La Dialogue", a meeting of defence ministers and the wider national security establishment of the Asia-Pacific region organised by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)

in Singapore in early June 2004, resulted in a degree of consensus, facilitating practical multilateral collaboration. Indonesia, however, crucially remains a weak link in this scheme.

How Serious a Threat?

In October 2003, the International Chamber of Commerce's International Maritime Bureau (IMB) quarterly report highlighted the problem of "piracy" in Indonesian waters (more accurately sea robbery when it occurs in territorial seas). The IMB pointed to a spate of attacks on small tankers by heavily armed pirates using

fast craft as well as fishing vessels, and suggested that separatist rebels from the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) were often behind attacks in the Malacca Strait. During February and March 2003, marauders armed with assault rifles attacked three chemical tankers in the Strait. In one case, they disabled the ship's radio, took the helm and apparently experimented with steering the vessel at various speeds. In another particularly serious incident in August 2003, pirates claiming membership of GAM attacked a fully-laden oil tanker some ten miles from Port Klang in Malaysia, forcing the vessel into Indonesian waters and taking its captain and other crew members as hostages. The IMB reported that attacks on ships in the Malacca Strait, which is transited by more than

Adm. Thomas B. Fargo (Commander, US Pacific Command) (left) conducts a press conference with Lt.Gen. Roy Kyamco (Commander, Philippine Armed Forces Southern Command) during a visit at the PAF SOUTHCOM HQ in Zamboanga on 27 July 2004. Adm. Fargo's visit was intended to discuss measures to improve the PAF's ability to combat terrorism. (Photo: US Navy)

50,000 vessels annually, increased from 16 in 2002 to 28 during 2003 and to 37 in 2004. Attacks in the Malacca Strait and Indonesian waters together accounted for roughly one-third of the worldwide total.

The authorities in Singapore, a country highly dependent on trade, have emphasised not only the growing seriousness of maritime crime but also its potential links with terrorism. In October, the city-state's Defence Minister, Rear-Admiral (Res.) Teo Chee Hean, pointed at the potential threat from sea-borne terrorism, focusing on the serious economic and strategic repercussions "for the whole world" that disruption of maritime commerce in the region could cause. In November, he warned more specifically that terrorists might turn "supertankers, LPG [liquid petroleum gas], LNG [liquefied natural gas] or chemical carriers into floating bombs". The Home Affairs Minister, Wong Kan Seng, argued in December that because the motives of pirates could not be ascertained until those persons were apprehended, they should on a precautionary basis be treated as terrorists. Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Security and Defence Tony Tan spoke in January about the "almost military precision" of recent attacks on merchant vessels, and the fears this raised over the pirates' possible terrorist links. Tan announced that Singapore was establishing a multi-agency task force to coordinate the island's protection from maritime threats.

Notwithstanding the presence in Indonesia of at least several hundred members of Jemaah

Islamiah (the pan-regional Southeast Asian affiliate of al-Qaeda, responsible for the Bali bombings in October 2002) and a spate of incidents in the Malacca and Singapore Straits during 2003, there was no firm evidence of links between maritime criminals and terrorists in the region. But even without the undertone of potential terrorism, security in the Straits appeared to be deteriorating and there were good reasons for heightened concern. Organised criminal syndicates, possibly with international links, appeared to be behind some of the increasingly competent attacks, which featured well-trained personnel using fast boats, modern weapons and sophisticated communications. The perpetrators were able to take advantage of weak law enforcement on the Indonesian side of the Straits, which effectively provided pirates and sea-robbers with sanctuary.

Part of the difficulty was Jakarta's weakened control over its provincially based security forces since the downfall of the Suharto regime in

1998. But, crucially, the Indonesian Navy and Marine Police also lacked adequate equipment in terms of operationally ready vessels, maritime patrol aircraft and radar stations along the coast of Sumatra. At the same time, anecdotal evidence suggested that elements of these same under-funded security forces may also at times have been complicit in maritime crime.

Fargo's Initiative

Extra-regional stakeholders in the security of the Straits have been particularly concerned about rising maritime crime and the potential for maritime terrorism there. Since the late 1990s, Japanese security policymakers have favoured the creation of a multinational maritime security and safety regime that would include a capacity for counter-piracy. Tokyo's more ambitious proposals – such as late Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi's 1999 call for a Regional Coast Guard body – have made little headway. Nevertheless, Japan has succeeded

Liaison officers from Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines onboard USCGC MELLON listen as a US Coast Guard officer explains how the service uses rigid hull inflatable boats (RIB) for seizure boarding.
The exchange was part of the SEACAT Southeast Asia Combined Anti-Terrorism exercise in May 2004.
(Photo: US Navy / Larson)

The Chief of Defence Forces and the Chiefs of Navy of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore at the ceremony for the launch of the trilateral coordinated patrols (MALSINDO) held onboard KRI TANJUNG DALPELE on 20 July 2004. From left to right: Chief of Staff of the Indonesian Navy, Adm. Bernard Kent Sondakh; Singapore Chief of Navy, Rear-Adm. Ronnie Tay; Chief of Defence Force of the Singapore Armed Forces, Lt.Gen. Ng Yat Chung; Commander-in-Chief of the Indonesian National Defence Forces, Gen. Endriartono Sutarto; Chief of Defence Force of the Malaysian Armed Forces, Gen. Zahidi Zainuddin; and Malaysian Chief of Navy, Adm. Mohd Anwar Mohd Nor.
(Photo: Singapore MINDEF)

in promoting bilateral anti-piracy exercises involving its own Coast Guard and regional states' security forces, and negotiations to establish a Regional Cooperation Agreement on Anti-Piracy in Asia (ReCAAP), primarily involving intelligence exchange between members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) plus Japan, China, South Korea, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, are continuing.

Washington's concerns over the potential terrorist threat in the region were clear in late 2001 and early 2002 when the US and Indian navies collaborated to protect US merchant shipping at the northern end of the Malacca Strait, which it has long viewed as the key maritime chokepoint in Asia. In early 2004, however, the United States began taking a more overt interest. Admiral Thomas B. Fargo, Commander-in-Chief of US Pacific Command, highlighted the issue during testimony to the US House of Representatives in March 2004 and with a speech in Vancouver in May. Fargo's House testimony provoked considerable controversy when he revealed that the Pentagon was formulating a Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI) to combat piracy, maritime terrorism and sea-trafficking in people and narcotics. According to Fargo, RMSI would involve not only closer intelligence-sharing with Southeast Asian states, but also deployment of US Marines and special forces on high-speed vessels to interdict maritime threats, particularly from terrorists.

Fargo secured support for RMSI from Singapore, which was negotiating a strategic framework agreement on security with Washington and had already supported other key US mari-

The proposed cooperation scheme under the Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI). (Source: US PACOM)
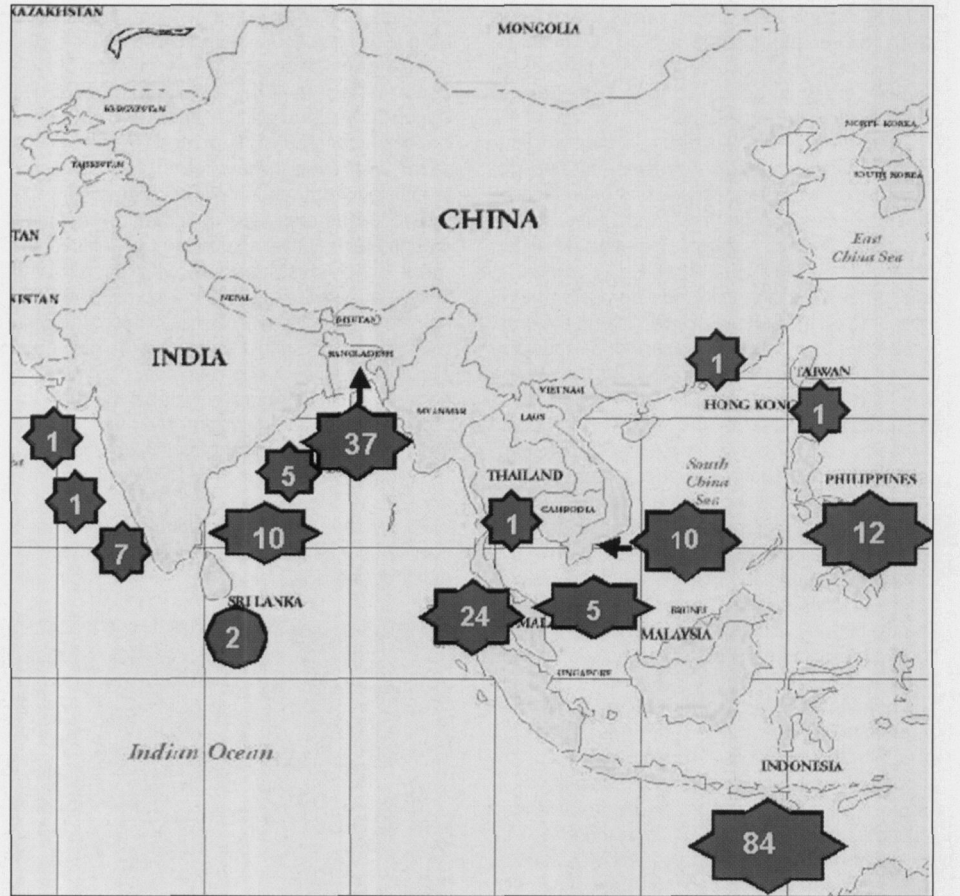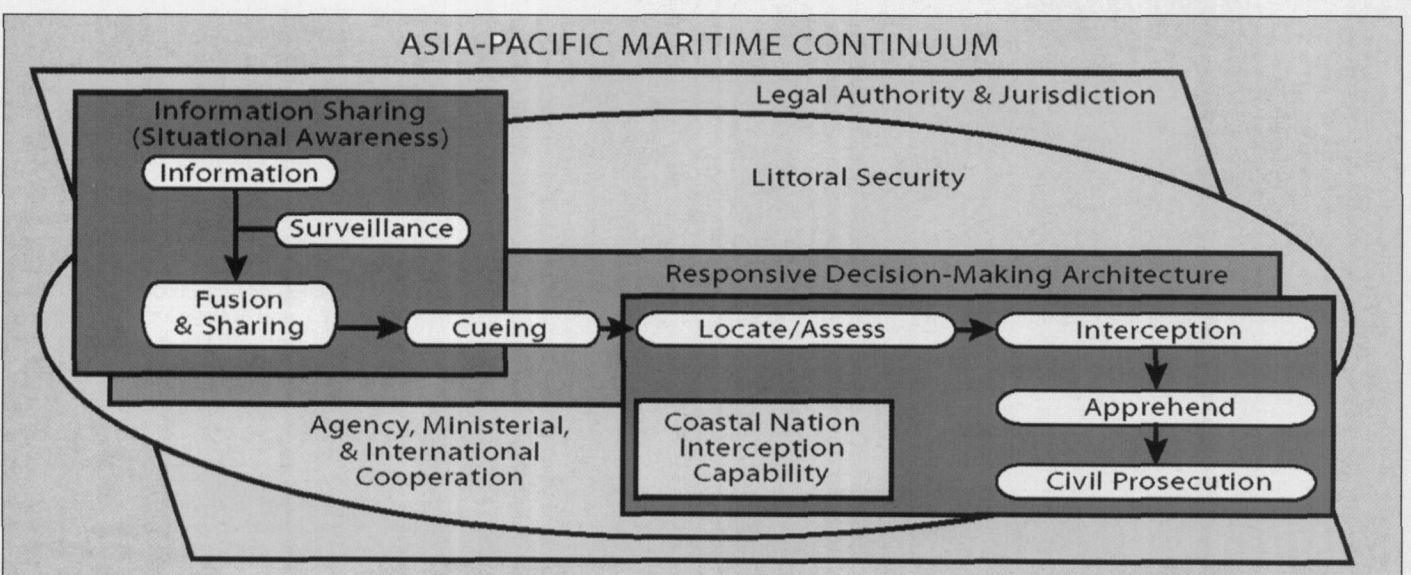
time security-related measures, notably the Proliferation Security Initiative and Container Security Initiative. However, neither Fargo's widely publicised testimony nor Singaporean Defence Minister Teo's related suggestion in late April that regional states lacked the capacity to maintain security in the Malacca Strait on their own were well-received by Indonesia or Malaysia. Both asserted that security there was the responsibility of the coastal states, that they possessed the capacity to ensure security without any deployment of extra-regional forces and that the introduction of such foreign forces might even be counterproductive by provoking terrorist incidents. In Vancouver,

Fargo attempted unsuccessfully to assuage these regional concerns, emphasising that RMSI was still embryonic and that it was mainly concerned with sharing information rather than the actual deployment of US forces in the region.

Indonesian and Malaysian objections to RMSI were almost certainly motivated in large part by their long-standing policies of seeking regional solutions to regional security problems, and their governments' need to appease large, anti-American nationalist and Islamist domestic political audiences. Moreover, Jakarta was acutely aware that RMSI represented a challenge to regional self-management that

A Royal Australian Navy boarding
party from HMAS MANNORA underway
in their RIB to a (compliant) boarding
during a recent exercise.
(Photo: Royal Australian Navy)

HMAS WESTRALIA conducts an
underway replenishment exercise
with HMNZS TE KAHA (top) and
RMSN KD JEBAT during Exercise
"Bersama Lima 04".
(Photo: Royal Australian Navy)

its own recent proposal for an ASEAN Security Community (which included a significant maritime dimension) was supposed to obviate.

Shangri-La Facilitation

The third IISS Asia Security Conference, styled the "Shangri-La Dialogue", facilitated significant convergence between the positions of the various interested parties regarding RMSI. US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld explained that Admiral Fargo's comments on military intervention in the region had been "misreported". While Malaysian Defence Minister Najib Tun Razak emphasised the danger that deployment of foreign forces would pose to the "ideological battle against extremism and militancy", he accepted that Southeast Asian states "should definitely expand our co-operation with the United States" in the acquisition and sharing of intelligence, and in "surveillance technology". At the conference, Indonesian representatives recognised the legitimate interests of extra-regional states in the security of the Straits and expressed willingness to engage them in a multilateral framework that respected littoral states' sovereignty.

With this momentum having been established, there were some significant developments in the aftermath of the Shangri-La Dialogue. Within days, the ministerial meeting of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (involving Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the UK) agreed that the scope of the grouping's military exercises, which already had a maritime focus, should be widened to include non-conventional security threats, including maritime terrorism. The first FPDA exercise to be carried out under this new focus, "Bersama Lima 04" was held in the South China Sea in mid-September. Immediately after the FPDA ministerial meeting, Indonesia proposed trilateral coordinated maritime patrols in the Malacca Strait, involving its own forces and those of Malaysia and Singapore. The first such Malacca Straits Coordinated Patrol (MALSINDO), during which each state's vessels patrolled its own territorial waters, commenced in late July 2004 and involved 17 ships. On 27 July, Malaysia and Singapore announced an agreement to increase military cooperation to encompass intelligence sharing.

Moreover, as part of a Southeast Asian tour in late June, Admiral Fargo visited Malaysia, and the two sides were reported to have "mended fences", with the US emphasising its respect for littoral states' sovereignty while offering to share intelligence and boost their "technical competency" to deal with piracy and

A new International Ship and Port facility Security code (ISPS) came into force on 1 July 2004. All ships of 500 tons gross tonnage and upwards as well as mobile offshore rigs and harbour facilities must be equipped with a ship security alert system, that can covertly notify shore authorities in the event of trouble. Furthermore, the system delivers a long-range identification and tracking feature. The introduction of this tool is regarded as a major effort in combating piracy and terrorist activities at sea.
(Source: internet)

potential maritime terrorism. For its part, Malaysia accepted that the US role posed no threat to its sovereignty, and welcomed Washington's offer of practical assistance. Littoral states also made efforts to enhance their maritime security capacities: the Indonesian Navy's Western Fleet announced that it was stepping up anti-piracy operations in the Malacca Strait, while Malaysia announced that it would establish a Coast Guard, to be known as the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency. The Agency is projected to begin providing security along the Strait of Malacca in the first quarter of 2005, and it will assume the current duties of the Maritime Rescue Coordinating Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

The Missing Link

Indonesia remains the weakest national component of the regional maritime security scene. The flurry of political activity over the issue at regional and wider international levels during 2004 appears to have encouraged the Indonesian government to adopt a more assertive posture, despite the distractions of the legislative and presidential elections. Yet there is little prospect of significantly increased budgets for its security forces [most particularly in the aftermath of the tsunami disaster – Ed.], and the poor economic conditions and weak law enforcement that have encouraged piracy and sea-robbery are likely to remain prevalent.
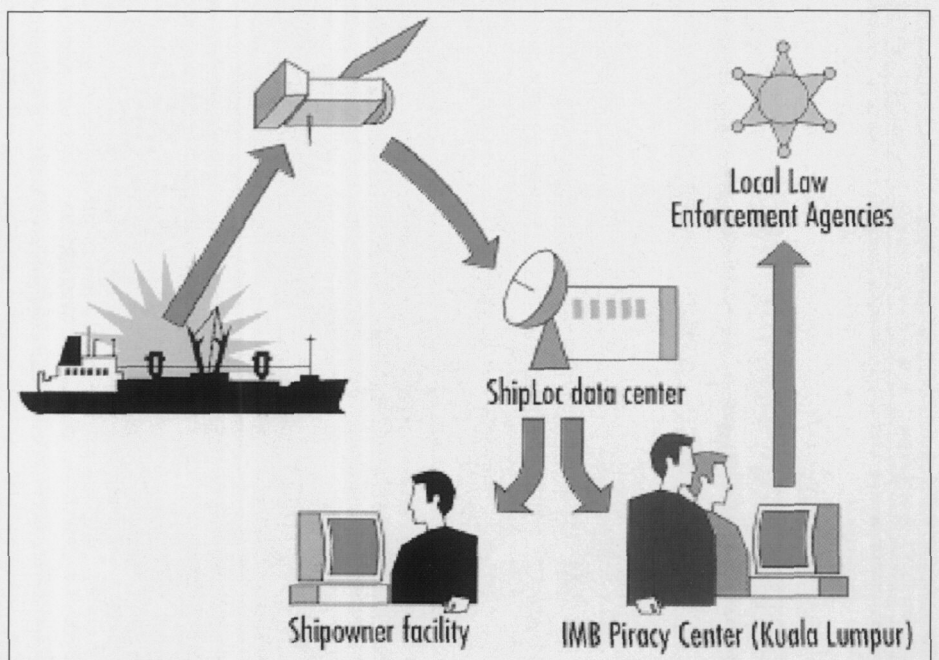
Modern Pirates in the South China Sea.
(Source: Internet)

If the problem of maritime crime is to be brought under control, and maritime terrorism in the Strait is to be forestalled, regional states and interested extra-regional powers alike will need to maintain pressure on Jakarta, while at the same time offering practical assistance. US assistance to Indonesia's armed forces will be ruled out until Jakarta brings military personnel to trial for past human-rights violations, but Washington – and other concerned governments – could usefully extend considerably greater support in the form of training and equipment transfers to the country's over-stretched and under-equipped Marine Police.

Particular attention should be paid to enhancing Indonesia's ability to contribute to a "recognised maritime picture" accessible to the security forces of regional states and extra-regional players. To make coordinated patrols involving regional states more than just symbolic exercises, regional states could also establish a legal framework and clear communications procedures to ensure effective "hot hand-over" from one states' security forces to another's when suspect vessels are being pursued.

The suicide attack on USS COLE in 2000 is a sobering pointer at the consequences of maritime terrorism.
(Photo: internet)