

Piracy - the medium term trends in our region

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The regional reality of piracy

Piracy is prevalent in the waters of Southeast Asia and the southern waters of Northeast Asia and is on the increase. The Kuala Lumpur-based Piracy Reporting Centre of the International Maritime Bureau reported in February that worldwide actual or attempted piracy attacks from January to December 2003 posted a steep rise of 10.4 percent to 370 from 335 in 2001. Indonesia accounted for 103 attacks and 16 more occurred in the busy Malacca Strait separating it from Malaysia. The number of seafarers killed also climbed to 21, with another 71 crew or passengers listed as missing, while 88 were injured. This compared to 10 killed and 38 injured the previous year. The number of hostages taken also nearly doubled to 359 in 2003.

The lack of successful prosecutions against most acts of piracy, the financial rewards that can be gained, and the difficulty in policing the waters in these regions, point to a continuing challenge for maritime businesses and law enforcement agencies.

While piracy in our region is currently confined to the waters of Asia, there is a real prospect that in the short to medium term the waters of the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea will be subjected to acts of piracy.

Pirates and their backgrounds

Pirates in our region are a mixed bag. Anyone with a fast boat, but generally fishermen, in Sumatra and Kalimantan and the Philippines who cannot catch enough fish to cover their family needs are typical and at one extreme, while ex-military personnel who employ powerful military weapons and high-speed pursuit vessels look to be at the other. The fishermen are not capable of hijacking larger ships and content themselves with stolen equipment, money, and personal items belonging to the vessel's crew. The ex-military are proving much more determined and regularly use lethal force to hijack ships, their cargo, and crew members for ransom.

These disparate groups are likely to be joined in the short to medium term by two other much more determined and organised groups: transnational organised crime; and terrorist.

A transnational organised crime consolidation of piracy

Maritime crime is on the increase and is providing a huge financial return to transnational organised crime. This type of crime currently ranges from the hijacking and theft of ships at sea, to cargo and container theft and diversion, commodity smuggling, cargo substitution, insurance fraud (including scuttling and arson), narcotics and arms trafficking by sea, people smuggling, illegal fishing, and the disposal of hazardous waste at sea.

Many of the acts of piracy occurring in our region are unlikely to be the results of transnational organised crime. But the potential rewards available from the types of ad hoc piracy operations will not be lost on transnational organised crime, which will attempt to organise and control the activities of the disparate groups involved to augment their extremely valuable criminal business.

Terrorism and piracy

Terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah have understood for 12 months or more the part that piracy can play in their terror campaigns. There has been considerable speculation and assessment that indicates these organisations are developing capabilities to hijack large ships and then use them to attack ports and port infrastructure. The potential hijacking and use of a petroleum or chemical tanker as a floating bomb in a major port has not been overlooked by regional authorities. The Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister, Tony Tan, recently indicated that the threat of a commercial vessel or a cruise liner being hijacked in one of the world's busiest shipping lanes and used as a floating bomb has prompted Singapore to review its maritime security plans. Most other littoral countries are doing the same as they move to implement the post September 11 International Maritime Organisation requirements.

The law enforcement response

Piracy is very extensive in the region and will continue to increase in the short to medium term with the involvement of transnational organised crime and terrorist organisations. The most vulnerable areas for such attacks will continue to be in the waters of disrupted states, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, and in maritime choke points, such as the Straits of Malacca, the Riau Islands and off the southern coast of China. Piracy is likely to increase in the waters of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands as economic infrastructure fails and corrupt practices increase. Terrorist involvement may also extend this vulnerability to ports throughout our immediate region.

But the financial impact of piracy on maritime transport operations, and the imperatives of the successful and continuing 'war on terror' will see an improvement in counter-piracy operations by regional countries, the 'coalition of the willing', and multilateral organisations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, International Maritime Organisation, and ASEAN.

These operations are likely to have immediate success in significantly reducing piracy operations involving transnational organised crime: transnational organised crime structures can be relatively easily 'unravelling' if an initial vulnerability is detected. Terrorist involvement in piracy will be more difficult to prevent and will require a coordinated strategy as part of the 'war on terror'. The fishermen undertaking acts of part time piracy to augment the catch will have their activities reduced through better security procedures onboard ships underway, and by the implementation of more professional and ongoing patrolling by coastguards and navies in the regional areas most affected by piracy.