

Maritime Security Assessment – Straits of Malacca

Introduction

The narrow Strait of Malacca is surrounded by the Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. It is considered to be the bottle neck for more than 60,000 vessels sailing between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The threat of piracy has always been a factor, but has increased substantially over the last two decades. The pirates comprise individuals from small criminals and organised criminal syndicates to armed separatists and military elements.

Recent development in piracy and armed robbery in the Malacca Straits

There has been a significant drop in the number of piracy attacks towards ships in the Malacca Straits over the last three years. In 2004, there were 38 reported incidents, dropping to 12 and 11 the next two years and ending on 7 for 2007, according to the International Maritime Bureau. From being one of the global hot-spots for piracy and armed robbery, it has become a relatively safe area considering the high density of vessels in the straits. The attacks reported in 2006 and 2007, were all against steaming ships. This is connected to the fact that most ships only passes through the Straits. With regard to the number of incidents in Malaysian and Singaporean waters, berthed and anchored ships are also relatively safe, considering the amount of traffic and the high numbers of pirates in the South East Asian region. This indicates that port security measures are, in general, effective. Surprisingly, the number of successfully accomplished attacks is only 55% of the total numbers of attacks for 2006, and even lower at 42% for 2007. More “professionalism” in terms of a higher percentage of successfully conducted attacks can be expected, bearing in mind the long history of piracy in the area. Although total number of attacks is too low to give a statistically valid interpretation, it does provide an indication of low skilled pirates lacking experience.

Regional measures

The statistics indicate that the number of reported attacks has fallen more than 80% between 2004 and 2007, with a 68% drop in 2005 alone. There are several reasons for the dramatic reduction in this period. In 2004, the littoral states in the Malacca Straits area launched a trilateral initiative, co-ordinating patrol forces to provide year round security. To complete this co-operation the maritime air surveillance operation, “Eyes in the Sky” (EIS) was launched during the same period. Both of these initiatives provided visible deterrence and contributed to a dramatic decline in the number of piracy and robbery incidents in the Malacca Straits. In addition, Malaysia has implemented unilateral measures such as monitoring ships transiting Malaysian waters and increased patrols by the Malaysian Police.

Conclusion

In recent years, the threat of terrorism towards ships has been highlighted in security reports and assessments. The initiatives taken by the littoral states to fight piracy and armed robbery in the area are likely to assist in preventing terrorist groups from attacking the maritime industry. Provided the co-operation continues, a further reduction in the threat of both piracy and terrorism against ships in the Malacca Straits is likely.

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