

CSCAP Memorandum on the Security of the Malacca and Singapore Straits

Jakarta, September 2007

Summary

Security issues in the Malacca and Singapore Straits should be defined comprehensively. This would entail a unified, holistic approach, in which national efforts are complemented by bilateral and regional cooperation, particularly between the littoral states and the major users.

Introduction

Given their crucial geo-strategic position in an age of 'globalised' maritime commerce, the security of the Straits of Malacca and Singapore is a matter of worldwide importance. And yet, discussion of piracy and maritime terrorism has been conspicuously absent from recent official and unofficial discourse on the Straits. This is perhaps the result of an intention to address possibly less controversial issues of navigational safety and marine environmental protection before moving on to potentially more contentious issues. The recent decline in the incidence of piracy and agreement that building the capacity of littoral states would be the most appropriate way to prevent maritime terrorism may have contributed to the absence of such discussion. There also appears to be a preference among some parties to address security issues on a bilateral basis between individual littoral and user states rather than in a multilateral forum.

The littoral states and the user states do have differing interests and priorities. The concerns of the user countries relate mainly to low probability, high consequence scenarios, such as the possible sea mining of the Straits by a terrorist group, a major shipping disaster, or a terrorist attack on a high value target passing through the Straits. Any of these scenarios could lead to major disruption of shipping through the Straits, with serious economic and strategic consequences. On the other hand, the concerns of the littoral countries relate mainly to high incidence, high consequence events that may occur frequently but attract less attention internationally. These events include trafficking in arms, drugs or people; illegal fishing; and incidents of ship-sourced marine pollution. The management of both types of event would require cooperation among the littoral countries, and between the littoral countries and the user states.

Threats and Responses

CSCAP recognises the following as significant threats to the security of the Malacca and Singapore Straits:

1. Maritime terrorism;
2. Environmental issues, including ship-sourced marine pollution;
3. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing;

4. Unclear maritime boundaries;
5. Human trafficking;
6. Smuggling of small arms and illegal goods;
7. Piracy and armed robbery;
8. Unclear regulations on the role of the Private Security Companies; and,
9. Lack of maritime domain awareness.

The littoral states and the stakeholders have established active programmes to respond to the current security threats in the area. There have also been significant activities at the regional level through ASEAN and the ARF. Many international agencies have also been active, particularly the IMO, whose statement in Singapore in September 2007 signified a major breakthrough at the Track One level. Several governments provide support for capacity building of the littoral states to maintain security in the Malacca and Singapore Straits. Nevertheless, there remains scope for improvement.

Recommendations

CSCAP recommends the following:

Comprehensive Security

1. The concerns of the littoral states with regard to the infringement of sovereignty should be recognised;
2. Territorial disputes should be resolved immediately in order to prevent impacts on other security issues;
3. Agreements that have been made within the framework of ASEAN should be implemented urgently;
4. The current mechanism of information sharing should be improved in order to enhance maritime domain awareness;
5. The littoral states, working together with major users, should establish contingency plans and information sharing mechanisms on various low probability threats; and,
6. CSCAP needs to look at what is being done in other maritime zones, such as the South China Sea.

Environmental Issues

1. Both littoral and user states should pay more attention to the maritime environment and establish closer cooperation on the issue, in order to avert impending crises linked to environmental degradation and ecological disaster.
