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OPERATIONALISING THE REGIONAL MARITIME SECURITY INITIATIVE

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Transforming a Win-Lose to a Win-Win Mindset

The announcement on 25 May 04 by Singapore Trade and Industry Minister, George Yeo and his Malaysian counterpart, Datin Seri Rafidah Aziz, of a joint plan to pool funds to help businessman from both countries scout for new ventures abroad may signal a new era of cooperation for both countries. More importantly, both Ministers highlighted the need to continue trade and conduct business even when the political climate was adverse, as businesses had to be market-driven, not politically driven. So, can this new level of cooperation in the economic sphere serve as a model in other sensitive areas like security and defence?

While the security authorities of Singapore and Malaysia have cooperated closely in combating the threat of terrorist networks like Jemaah Islamiyah, the resolution of defence issues has proven more challenging. Traditionally there can only be one winner in a military conflict, and that winner takes all. However, the nature of conflict has changed perceptibly in an age of economic globalisation, where the threats to the security and well-being of a country have a regional and even global dimensions. Transnational challenges like piracy and terrorism have become more pronounced, requiring cooperative action even as militaries continue to modernise in a conventional fashion.

Datin Rafidah highlighted the diminished significance of traditional conflict when she said, "Whatever it is, Malaysia and Singapore will not come to a point of war with each other." Instead, she stressed that as the world was getting competitive they must go out and do business together. It is this spirit of doing business together that will prove vital if they are to deal effectively with piracy and prevent an occurrence of maritime terrorism or the proliferation of nuclear-related materiel in the Malacca and Singapore Straits.

The Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI)

Ever since Admiral Thomas Fargo gave his testimony to the House Armed Services Committee on the 31 March 2004 regarding the U.S. Pacific Command Posture, controversy has arisen over the nature of the Regional Maritime Security Initiative or RMSI. Central to the objections by both the Malaysians and the Indonesians is the issue of sovereignty and the reluctance to grant an extra-regional power the freedom to conduct patrols and law enforcement at will in their backyard. Naval patrols by an extra-regional power are viewed as contrary to the innocent transit passage granted to ships using the Straits of Malacca since

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they were designated as international waterways under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

But what exactly did Admiral Fargo propose? In his testimony, Fargo mentioned that the RMSI is US Pacific Command's effort to operationalise the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and the Malacca Straits initiative to improve international cooperation against transnational threats like proliferation, terrorism, and piracy. His stated aims were to build and synchronise inter-agency and international capacity, to harness available and emerging technologies, to develop a maritime situational awareness to match the picture that is available for international airspace, and to develop responsive decision-making structures that can call on immediately available maritime forces to act when required.

The RMSI consists of three components: a sea situation picture of the traffic in the Malacca and the Singapore Straits, a decision-making structure to decide on actions to take with respect to clandestine activity that is occurring, and a standby maritime force to act on that decision. It will be instructive to examine each of the three components and see how the pieces can fit together in a manner acceptable to the littoral states as well as the users of the Straits.

Building a Sea Situation Picture of the Malacca Straits

A quick and effective way to build a sea situation picture of the Malacca and Singapore Straits is to leverage on existing surveillance and tracking assets. Singapore already has the Vessel Traffic Information System (VTIS), which monitors and tracks vessel movements in the Singapore Straits. Port Klang has the Vehicle Traffic Management System (VTMS), which monitors vessel activity in and around the port, and is linked to a maritime and enforcement coordination centre located in the naval base at Lumut.

Another system that is implemented in conjunction with the VTMS is the STRAITREP, a joint Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore mandatory ship reporting system in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. Implemented in December 1998 under the auspices of the International Maritime Organisation, the STRAITREP requires most vessels using the Malacca and Singapore Straits proceeding in any of the nine designated sectors to provide a report to the Vessel Traffic Services (VTS) Authority in Klang, Johore and Singapore. The STRAITREP consists of eight items including information on the vessel's name, position, course, speed, notification and description of hazardous cargo, sustained defects or damage, and notification and description of pollutants or dangerous cargo lost overboard. The report is currently made by voice via very high frequency (VHF) radio channels.

The International Maritime Organisation mandated Automatic Identification System (AIS), to be installed on larger ships of above 300 gross tons by December 2004, will provide and receive ship identity and positional information to shore stations, ships and aircraft; it will monitor and track ships, as well as exchange data with the VTS Authority. As the AIS report is generated automatically, AIS-equipped ships will also have a concealed alert system that can send a covert signal or message to the VTS Authority should an emergency occur on board.

Although the STRAITREP and the impending implementation of the AIS on larger ships provides excellent information on the ships characteristics and give the VTS Authorities a good sea situation picture, it has two limitations. Firstly, the STRAITREP covers only the

southern stretches of the Malacca Straits, south of One Fathom Bank, and the Singapore Straits, and no similar system exists north of One Fathom Bank. Secondly, although the AIS is capable of interfacing with long range communications systems like the Inmarsat-C satellite system as well as medium frequency (MF) or high frequency (HF) radios, the IMO has not made the long range identification and tracking of ships mandatory, although more details on this issue is expected by end 2004.

Decision-Making Structures

The second component of the RMSI requires the development of a decision making structure to decide on actions to take with respect to clandestine activity that is occurring. Again, the RMSI can leverage on existing arrangements for vessel safety in the Malacca and Singapore Straits, i.e. the national maritime rescue coordination centres (MRCCs) in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Specific vessel information from the VTS Authorities is made available to the MRCCs to facilitate the rescue of personnel from distressed ships within their search and rescue regions (SRR).

The IMO's Maritime Safety Committee has also promulgated directives that will allow national governments to grant MRCCs the authority to respond to acts of violence against ships, which include acts of piracy, sea robbery and any other security incident directed against a ship. The definition of a "security incident" is broad and allows the MRCCs to respond to "any suspicious act or circumstance threatening the security of a ship, including a mobile offshore drilling unit and a high speed craft, or of a port facility or of any ship/port interface or any ship to ship activity." In addition, the alert for the security incident can come from a variety of sources including but not limited to other ships, adjacent MRCCs, ship operators, flag administrations, and the nations' coast guard or navy.

Standby Maritime Force

The third and most easily fulfilled component of the RMSI is the development of a maritime force that is readily available to act on decisions taken by the decision-making authority. Again, the Indonesia, Malaysian Navies and Singapore's Navy and Police Coast Guard are already part of the search and rescue organization of the respective MRCCs and have assets available at all times to respond rapidly to emergencies.

Conclusion

Thus many of the ingredients for the RMSI are already in place in the form of existing or impending mechanisms designed by IMO to enhance safety of navigation for ships plying the Malacca and Singapore Straits. One advantage of these arrangements is the binding nature of the agreements as a result of the multilateral consultations in the IMO. Therefore, using these agreements as a platform for RMSI will make the initiative palatable to both the littoral states and the multinational users of the straits. Another advantage is that these mechanisms have been in place for some time already and have been successfully activated. Thus if RMSI rides on these mechanisms, it can be an immediately operational initiative with 'teeth'.

However riding on the IMO-mandated agreements also means that the main driver for the RMSI will not be the navies or the coast guards of the three littoral states but their

national maritime authorities with the navies and coast guards in support. It also means that for the RMSI to be successful, most of the action will have to be undertaken by the three littoral states with U.S. PACOM performing a facilitation role, assisting in training, the provision of intelligence, and technical support. For sure, PACOM's naval assets cannot be deployed in an interdiction role if existing IMO arrangements are adhered to. If its main role is to be a facilitator, it may be better for PACOM to change tack and accentuate the use of "soft power" in a multilateral forum to persuade the reluctant parties on the merits of the RMSI and demonstrate that the RMSI in the Malacca and Singapore Straits will be a win-win proposition for both the littoral and user states alike.

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