S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
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RSIS COMMENTARIES

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COMBATING PIRACY AND ARMED ROBBERY IN ASIA:
BOOSTING ReCAAP'S ROLE

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The ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ISC) is an international organisation that comprises 14 member countries in the region to combat piracy. Despite its many advantages, the ISC has some weaknesses which should be addressed so that it can be a model for other regions. (Editor's note: This is a republication, correcting an earlier version of the commentary. This updated version amends the first paragraph to make clear that Indonesia and Malaysia are not members of ReCAAP.)

THE REGIONAL Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia, or ReCAAP, comprises 14 member countries, which includes eight of the ten ASEAN countries (excluding Indonesia and Malaysia), China, Japan, South Korea, Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka. ReCAAP called for the setting up of an Information Sharing Centre (ISC) in Singapore and the Agreement has come into force since 4 September 2006. Subsequently the ISC was launched on 29 November in the same year in Singapore.

The ReCAAP ISC is the first multilateral government-to-government anti-piracy and armed robbery effort in the region. It has the status of an International Organisation (IO) with local staff and overseas secondees from the member countries. Besides the setting up of the ISC and the secretariat in Singapore, the Agreement allowed for the formation of the Governing Council with one representative per contracting party to oversee the operations of the ISC.

The Agreement also called for a focal point per contracting party, which would act as the point of contact for the ISC. ReCAAP ISC is the platform for information exchange with the focal points being linked via the Information Network System (IFN), which is a web-based and secure network. Funding for the ISC comes from voluntary contributions from the contracting parties.

Strengths of ReCAAP

Being the first regional multilateral government-to-government effort, ReCAAP as an organisation has many strengths.

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Firstly, the requirement for each contracting party to have a focal point means that contracting parties which may not have a habit of inter-agency coordination would now have to look at its organisation to deal with armed robbery and piracy. This is because the focal points have several specified roles which include: (1) managing the piracy and armed robbery incidents within its territorial waters; (2) acting as a point of information exchange with the ISC; (3) facilitating its country's law enforcement investigations; and (4) coordinating surveillance and enforcement for piracy and armed robbery with neighbouring focal points. As the focal points could be the country's Coast Guard, Marine Police, Navy, Port Authority or Customs (Marine), the ReCAAP has in fact jump-started the processes for inter-agency cooperation in its member countries as they would have to look at how the various maritime agencies operate with each other.

Another strength of ReCAAP is in its capacity-building programme. Many a time, maritime organisations within a country, not to mention those between countries, tend to operate in their own self-contained silos with minimal interaction between the organisations. ReCAAP helps to break down these silos and inculcates a greater awareness between the contracting countries. It achieves this through capacity-building initiatives such as exercises, training workshops and technical assistance programmes that share best practices.

Thirdly, ReCAAP is an inclusive organisation. Although piracy and armed robbery may affect governments, the shipping community are largely the ones that bear the brunt of its consequences. As a result, expertise on how to deal with the issue may not reside in the government departments alone but could well reside in organisations that are outside of government. Recognising that other organisations have a role to play, ReCAAP enters into cooperative arrangements with a variety of organisations that may be interested in sharing information or in conducting capacity-building programmes.

These may include governmental, intergovernmental, international, or non-governmental organisations, and research institutes. Some examples of partner organisations include the Asian Shipowners' Forum (ASF), the Baltic and International Maritime Council (BIMCO), the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the International Independent Tanker Owners' Organisation (INTERTANKO).

Significantly, ReCAAP also recognises that knowledge could also reside in countries that are not currently parties to the Agreement. As such, ReCAAP is also open for accession by any state, which paves the way for ReCAAP to grow when more like-minded states decide to join it.

ReCAAP's limitations

Although ReCAAP has many strengths, there are also some limitations associated with its organisation and processes.

Firstly, as both Malaysia and Indonesia have not ratified the Agreement and are not part of ReCAAP, the effectiveness of ReCAAP could be limited. This is because the major sea lanes in the region -- the Malacca Strait, the Sunda Strait and the Lombok Strait -- lie either partially or wholly within the territorial and archipelagic waters of Indonesia and Malaysia. As many of the incidents of armed robbery occur within Indonesian and Malaysian waters, information from these two countries would contribute greatly to the fight against piracy and armed robbery.

To their credit, ReCAAP has been working hard to cover this gap by establishing links at the operational level with the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency as well as its Indonesian equivalent, BAKORKAMLA. Hopefully, information from these two organisations will be forthcoming, as both Indonesia and Malaysia have expressed support for the ReCAAP at the Batam Meeting of the foreign ministers of the three countries in August 2005.

Secondly, ReCAAP ISC does not have an operational role at present. This is because it receives information on piracy and armed robbery incidents from the focal points, which necessarily means a delay in reporting. To improve the timeliness of reports, ReCAAP ISC could engage the shipping industry and encourage ships to report directly to it. On receipt of the reports, ReCAAP could then cue the respective operations centres of its member countries that have responsibility for deploying patrol ships on the ground.

This would improve the timeliness of reports tremendously and will also speed up the response to incidents. To perform the operations role, ReCAAP ISC would have to set up a small operations centre with the necessary communications equipment, and be linked to the respective operations centres of the member countries.

Thirdly, besides the threat of armed robbery and piracy, shipping and hub ports also face the threat from maritime terrorism. In fact, many of the measures taken by ships to combat piracy and armed robbery also have the effect of reducing a ship's vulnerability to maritime terrorists. With a regional network of focal points already established, ReCAAP ISC is also well placed to be the regional coordinator of maritime counter-terrorist efforts.

ReCAAP ISC can perform this role in very much the same way as it does anti-piracy and anti-armed robbery. It can be through sharing information of actual, attempted or potential maritime terrorist incidents, and building the capacity of regional countries to counter maritime terrorism through the sharing of best practices.

ReCAAP's potential

ReCAAP, as well as its ISC, can be seen as a building block to regional integration as it brings together regional countries to address a common security challenge -- that of piracy and armed robbery. ReCAAP does this through the sharing of information in three ways: the ISC-Focal Point Network; a capacity-building programme by building on contracting parties' strength to share best practices; and by engaging in cooperative arrangement activities with like-minded organisations to strengthen the focal points' ability to manage incidents at sea.

ReCAAP ISC operates on the principles of respect for the sovereignty of member countries, offering value through effectiveness, and transparency of operations. This facilitates cooperation between the contracting parties. They could well serve as the blueprint for future functional cooperation in areas that are of interest to regional countries. ReCAAP ISC could also serve as the model for other regions that are faced with the scourge of piracy and armed robbery.

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