

BEHIND THE NEWS MARITIME SECURITY



The Singapore navy's 180 Squadron board a ship in the strait during an exercise. The city state is willing to consider an international patrol of the pirate-infested waters off Indonesia. Photo: Reuters

Afternoon on the Singapore Strait. The horizon is blurry from the searing equatorial heat and massive ships are so numerous that they seem like hallucinations. While the crews on hundreds of ships wait out the heat of the day, Singaporean Coast Guard vessels are on patrol, cutting between the tankers and tugs.

There is good reason for their diligence. On board one of the patrol vessels a senior official, N. Shanmuganandam, points out the area where an unseen line marks the end of Singaporean territorial waters and those of Indonesia, which the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) has called the world's most dangerous stretch of water. A run-down Indonesian junk is steaming into those waters, leaving the modern law-and-order of Singapore for the comparably anarchic Indonesian archipelago. The image brings to life the contrast between the two countries.

Singapore's port is the world's busiest and one of the most important hubs in the global economy. Mr Shanmuganandam pointed eastward towards an enormous refinery – Shell's largest – shimmering in the distance.

With its economic importance, many high-profile targets and a pro-western tilt, Singapore is a dream target for terrorists and they have plotted to attack it in the past. A Jemaah Islamiah plan to attack the city state was uncovered in late 2001. Details have since emerged about the plans to attack a US warship while it was travelling from the Sembawang Wharf via Tekong Island. The patrol schedules and routes of the Coast Guard were monitored before the plot was foiled by Singaporean authorities.

Singapore is quick to react to such threats as the city state is hugely dependant on sea-borne trade. The vigilance of its authorities has positioned it as an island of respite in some seriously dangerous waters.

The Malacca and Singapore straits form the most important and most dangerous waterway in the world. The straits funnel 50,000 vessels a year between the biggest economies of the west and the east. Half of the world's oil and a third of its trade pass through and efforts to effectively police them have proved fruitless.

Such efforts have included joint patrols by the littoral states, but they are seen as flawed as they don't include

effective hot-pursuit rights or a common command centre. Experts also point to the fact that Indonesia has only six vessels committed to such patrols, which is hopelessly inadequate to police the many islands and potential hideaways in which pirates can lurk.

This week, Indonesia and Singapore launched a surveillance radar system in a bid to boost security in the Singapore Strait. The system would begin monitoring the narrow stretch of water today, said Indonesian Navy spokesman Colonel Sumantri. "It aims to provide better security monitoring – including the surveillance of potential pirate attacks – in the Singapore Strait," he said.

The system was introduced after talks in Jakarta last month between Indonesia's military chief General Endriartono Sutarto and his Singaporean counterpart Lieutenant-General Ng Yat Chun.

Colonel Sumantri could not say if the radar system would be sufficient to also oversee security in the Malacca Strait, and without the inclusion of Malaysia on the launch of the system, an opportunity for a unified stand on the issue of security in the strait has again been lost.

On June 15, the foreign ministers of Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia will gather on Singapore's Bintan Island to discuss such threats to the Malacca

Strait. They will have to address the fact that piracy in the strait is again on the rise, despite a lull in attacks after the December 26 tsunami. Questions of sovereignty have been a prickly issue in the past, with Malaysia and Indonesia particularly sensitive to inferences that they cannot properly police their shores. They have strongly rejected suggestions that the security of the strait be internationalised to include patrols by the US and other nations; Singapore has signalled more willingness to consider such proposals.

Malaysia and Indonesia seem willing to consider co-operation among the littoral states, but relations between the two nations have grown tense. They have sparred over Malaysia's treatment of Indonesian migrant workers and over disputed, energy-rich islands off the coast of Borneo, where the two navies almost clashed in March.

The ministers are also sure to discuss new efforts by security firms – such as Singapore's Background Asia Risk Solutions – to provide security boats staffed by former elite soldiers from nations around the region for ships making their way through the strait. Malaysia has threatened to arrest such "mercenaries" and Indonesia has also condemned such operations.

Shipping interests and security analysts will be closely watching the summit to see if new initiatives arise, as the situation is viewed as worsening. The vice-commandant of the US Coast Guard, Vice-Admiral Terry Cross, re-

cently said that "the ease with which attacks are taking place could alert terrorists to opportunities".

Sceptics say the refusal of the Malaysians and Indonesians to compromise on sovereignty means the strait will not be safe any time soon.

"International shipping is paying the price for the obsessive emphasis on sovereignty in the Strait of Malacca," said Alan Chan, chairman of PetroShips. "There has got to be some patrol organised internationally, under the mandate of the UN, or the International Maritime Organisation as an agency of the UN."

Mr Chan said the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, although vaguely worded, could provide a legal basis for an international force to safeguard the critical shipping lane.

Several new developments in the strait are increasing the pressure on the three nations to consider new ideas on how to increase security.

Michael Richardson, author of the book *A Time Bomb for Global Trade*, which focuses on maritime-related terrorism and threats to shipping, said that "those preying on shipping are becoming better armed and organised".

"They sometimes have satellite phones and can eavesdrop on the communications of ships they are targeting. Automatic assault rifles, like the M-16 and AK-47, are now commonly carried and fired," he said. "Rocket-propelled grenades and hand grenades have reportedly been brandished."

The number of attacks in the strait has risen after the post-tsunami lull, with at least eight incidents since February. And while piracy worldwide fell by 26 per cent last year as reported by the International Maritime Bureau, incidents of violence increased and crew deaths were up by 29 per cent. Indonesia alone accounted for 29 per cent of the attacks last year.

The prevalence of piracy in the region might be spawning a new trend of commercial fraud. An incident involving a supposed pirate attack on the Indonesian vessel Inabukawa now looks increasingly suspicious to investigators. The ship docked at Malaysia's Johor Port and was checked by port security and all its documents found in order and no trouble evident on the vessel.

The ship off-loaded its cargo of tin ingots valued at US\$1 million over a two-day period, while the captain was supposedly held at gunpoint. It then sailed for Indonesian waters where the pirates fled and the crew subsequently reported the incident. Malaysian port officials found the cargo at a nearby warehouse. Numerous claims against the cargo by Indonesian interests have further perplexed officials and raised suspicions about fraud. Such incidents can only complicate enforcement efforts and raise the cost of shipping.

Because of their shadowy nature, it's hard to get a proper idea of who is behind the attacks. But analysts say they don't seem to be the work of independent corsairs bound for booty. Sophisticated crime syndicates who receive "protection money" from shipping interests that ply the strait are alleged to be co-ordinating attacks.

"It is well known that ship owners have been quietly paying ransom or 'protection' money without reporting such incidents, so that their business operations are not hampered," Tan Ser Giam, managing director of the Singapore-based shipping firm Navigation, told *The Business Times*. He said that Indonesian pirates had "a big network of informants in the region and are keenly aware of the movements of all our vessels. They are apparently quite familiar with Singapore companies and they have people here who are sympathisers".

Many will say, off the record, that the problem lies principally with Indonesia, a sprawling archipelago of 17,508 islands with a navy that is corrupt and under-resourced. If Indonesia was serious about protecting the strait from piracy, the thinking goes, it could start with inquiries about the high-powered speedboats that seem rather out of place in rural villages along the coast of Sumatra. But Indonesia has other priorities, such as tsunami reconstruction and quelling separatist insurrections.

It may take a disaster to change the thinking of Malaysia and Indonesia on sovereignty and the strait. A terrorist attack or piracy-related accident that shuts down the Malacca Strait for even a few days would send shockwaves through the global economy. Unfortunately, such a disaster may be the only thing that leads to real steps towards security.

Additional reporting from Agence France-Press

Crooked strait

Piracy was once the main fear in the Malacca Strait. Now, the spectre of terrorism has added urgency to calls for protection on the waterway, writes *Jeremy Hurewitz*

CHINA, JAPAN PLAY POLITICS ON WATERWAY

As the world's second- and third-largest oil consumers, no two countries depend on the Malacca Strait more than China and Japan. But that doesn't mean they work together to keep the strait safe.

The Malacca Strait is an area where the geo-political struggle between the two Asian giants is being played out.

Japan has long been a leader in drawing attention to the dangers of the Malacca Strait and in providing assistance. Japan's Nippon Foundation is a non-profit

association influential on maritime policy in the strait.

In 2001, Japan initiated the Regional Co-operation Agreement on Anti-Piracy in Asia, a pact that facilitates co-operation on maritime safety issues between 16 nations.

The Chinese have been moving more quietly, using some of the diplomatic capital they've assiduously acquired over recent years. Insiders say that Malaysia's refusal to allow international patrols was at least partly a result of Chinese pressure to not allow US military

ships to patrol the strait. A new partnership with Indonesia, announced in April, includes provisions for maritime co-operation.

Both countries worry about disruption of energy imports.

China fears being cut off from energy supplies should a conflict with Taiwan arise and lead to a blockading of the strait. Japan, meanwhile, remembers the blockade it faced in the second world war.

Jeremy Hurewitz

Australians transfixed as compatriot Corby awaits her fate

Today's verdict on the drug-smuggling case in Indonesia may upset improved political ties, writes *Janaki Kremmer*

Today, Australian eyes will be on an Indonesian courtroom, where their compatriot Schapelle Corby is expected to receive a verdict on charges of drug smuggling, a crime that can carry the death penalty.

Last October, officials at Bali airport found 4.1kg of marijuana zipped inside Corby's boogie-board bag.

Since then, her case has captivated Australia, where the 27-year-old from Brisbane, who claims innocence, has been shown constantly on the news being hustled in and out of a media-packed courtroom.

Indonesians may be treating Corby's predicament as just another drug case, but outrage on the young woman's behalf has spilled from all quarters of Australian media, with pointed questions being aired about the integrity of Indonesia's legal system.

Legal experts, and even movie

stars such as Russell Crowe, have weighed into the debate on Corby's side.

A few cynics have suggested that the outpouring of sympathy in this case – while there are two Australians on death row in Singapore and Vietnam and 11 others in custody in Indonesia – may be driven somewhat by Corby's good looks.

While passions are running high among ordinary Australians over the case – and a guilty verdict would inflame them further – political analysts suggest the blossoming relationship between Jakarta and Canberra has proven too important for both governments to jeopardise by politicising the case.

In the past two years, the two countries have established a ministerial forum where key ministers meet to discuss issues ranging from mining to immigration. And this has opened up more possibilities for resolving conflicts – such as the

Corby case – at least at government level.

"Where you have such closeness, you get a totally different relationship, a deeper one, and although there may be domestic pressure on [Australian Prime Minister John] Howard after the verdict, the diplomatic relationship will most likely be managed well where staffers are so close to each other," says Virginia Hooker, professor of Indonesian and Malay at the Australian National University's Faculty of Asian Studies.

The Howard government has been trying to build on democratic developments in Indonesia, among them judicial reform. This has forced Australia to emphasise dialogue over vitriol in the Corby case.

"Australia has argued for a very long time that Indonesia should have an independent judiciary," said Foreign Minister Alexander Downer.

"Of course, the downside of that is that you can't ring up the president any more and say 'Release this inmate, tell the court to do this, tell the court to do that'."

Malcolm Cook, programme

director for Asia and the Pacific at the Lowy Institute, an independent think-tank in Sydney, says he does not believe there has been any pressure from the Australian government on Indonesia. But, he says, if a guilty verdict is handed down, then Mr Howard would face domestic pressure over his close relationship with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

"The defence has been successful in whipping up support for the young woman in the media [in Australia], and the ambivalence about Indonesia domestically would only get exacerbated," says Mr Cook.

In a poll conducted by the Lowy Institute earlier this year, when asked how they felt about a long list of allies and neighbouring countries, Australians rated Indonesia just above Iran and Iraq, with a marginal 52 per cent saying they felt positive about the place and 42 per cent saying they felt negative.

The Howard government has made a few moves to help Corby's defence, including the temporary release of a prisoner who went to testify at her trial.

Corby's defence has claimed all along that baggage handlers in Aus-



Schapelle Corby, flanked by Indonesian police, is accused of smuggling 4kg of marijuana into Bali. The Australian beauty therapist will have her verdict handed down today. Photo: Reuters

tralia planted the drugs in Corby's luggage as part of a bungled domestic smuggling operation – and that the drugs were never meant to arrive in Indonesia at all.

Sources at the Indonesian embassy say that although the Australian government appears to have supported the defence during the trial, there had been no attempt to interfere with the case.

However, there are lingering doubts in Australia about the sanctity of the legal system in Indonesia,

which is still evolving from the days of the Suharto regime, when one's legal argument often had no bearing on the outcome of a case. Questions are being asked as to why no fingerprints were taken from the bag that contained the marijuana the moment it was discovered in the student's boogie-board bag in Denpasar airport.

There are other issues as well. "Unlike Australia and America, which have a jury system, a panel of three judges will decide on the fate

of the girl, and these judges have a very strong history of conviction on drugs cases," Mr Cook says.

What makes the matter even more difficult for the Australian government is the fact that Ausaid has been funding the training of judges and the legal establishment in a more democratic system.

"Although I'm not sure whether these three judges have had the training, it really makes things much more sticky for Australia because here is Australia putting a huge effort into changing the old system," says Professor Hooker.

The case presents pitfalls for Indonesia as well – not the least of which are threats of a travel boycott by Australians in the event of a guilty verdict. Travellers to Bali already have a heightened concern about their luggage.

And *Traveltrade*, a trade magazine, reports that Bali bookings have slowed by 20 per cent in recent weeks.

However, a verdict of "not guilty" could go down badly in Indonesia, where the judiciary might be accused of succumbing to pressure from Australia.

The Christian Science Monitor