

Terrorism In Southeast Asia: Keeping Al-Qaeda At Bay

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Southeast Asia has emerged as an important front on the war on terror. The regional al-Qaeda affiliate Jemaah Islamiya has launched two major terrorist attacks since October 2002, and, despite a significant number of arrests, retains the capability for more devastating strikes in the future. There has been tremendous concern that these future attacks could be maritime based. Southeast Asia straddles some of the most critical maritime trade routes in the world, including the Straits of Malacca. Global shipping remains highly vulnerable. Asia owns 40 percent of all cargo ships, is home to some of the largest container ports, and over 25 percent of the world's cargo and 50 percent of the world's oil goes through the Straits of Malacca. Any maritime attack there would have a profound impact on the global economy. Moreover, maritime security across the region is appalling. The International Maritime Bureau reported that more than 80 percent of the world's pirate attacks take place in Southeast Asian waters annually, which leads one to ask: if pirates can act with such impunity, what is stopping terrorists?

Attacks on U.S. Naval Vessels

Al-Qaeda has always maintained an interest in maritime terrorism. While the planned 1999 attack on the USS Sullivans failed, the attack on the USS Cole succeeded in 2000, leaving 17 sailors dead and one of the most advanced naval vessels almost sunk. The head of al-Qaeda's naval operations, Abdul Rahim Mohammed Hussein al-Nashiri was captured in Yemen in November 2002 en route to Southeast Asia. The architect of the USS Cole and the MT Limburg bombings, al-Nashiri had already dispatched maritime suicide terror squads to Morocco to target U.S. naval vessels passing through the Straits of Gibraltar.

There is evidence of similar plots in Southeast Asia. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) cells arrested in Singapore between December and January 2002 had marked charts of the Sembawang wharf, where U.S. naval vessels docked, in apparent preparation for a Cole-styled attack. And video footage taken by JI operatives of the Yishun MRT subway station, used by U.S. personnel to travel to the naval facility there, was found in the rubble of Mohammed Atef's house in Kabul. The approximately 120 annual port visits by U.S. naval vessels in Singapore is only expected to increase with the soon-to-be-completed construction of an aircraft carrier docking facility.

At a January 2000 meeting in Kuala Lumpur, al-Qaeda operatives not only prepared for the September 11th attacks, but also reviewed the failed USS Sullivans operation and planned the attack on the USS Cole. At the time, Khallad bin Attash suggested planning a similar attack on U.S. naval vessels at Port Klang, Malaysia. According to the interrogation of a senior al-Qaeda operative, Omar al Faruq, a Somali member active in Indonesia (named Ghalib) was plotting to attack U.S. naval vessels in the crowded and chaotic port of Surabaya, but was apparently unable to recruit enough personnel. Clearly the intent to target U.S. naval vessels exists, only the operational space to plan and execute such an attack seems lacking.

Maritime Terrorism

Whereas attacking a U.S. naval vessel is currently beyond the reach of al-Qaeda and JI operatives, an attack on commercial vessels is not. Al-Nashiri was found with a 180-page dossier listing maritime targets of opportunity. This information fits with the overall al-Qaeda strategy laid out in an October 2002 broadcast in which Ayman al Zawahiri warned that al-Qaeda "would target the nodes of your [the West's] economy." Any attack on commercial shipping would have a devastating impact on the world's economy. An attack in the congested Straits of Malacca would slow traffic through that important sea lane. The Strait, which is 600 miles long but only 1.5 miles wide at its narrowest, has more than 50,000 large ships traveling through it annually. In 2002, between 40-50 oil tankers (carrying approximately 10 million barrels of oil) and 10-12 liquefied natural gas (LNG) tankers sailed in the Straits each day. These numbers are set to increase greatly as Asian countries, especially China, continue their current rates of economic growth and energy imports surge. As after the October 2002 attack in Yemen, any attack would lead to a spike in maritime insurance rates as well as economic shutdowns, with manufacturers depending more on just-in-time deliveries than before.

As al-Qaeda stated on October 13, 2002, "If a boat that did not cost \$1000 managed to devastate an oil tanker of that magnitude, imagine the extent of the danger that threatens the West's commercial lifeline which is petroleum." Half the world's oil and much of its LNG passes through the Straits of Malacca, creating an inviting target in an area already riddled with piracy and poorly policed by Indonesia's navy. The appalling condition of the Indonesian navy and lack of concern for maritime terrorism has created conditions where terrorists could act with near impunity.

Another scenario that keeps Singaporean security officials awake at night is the hijacking of a vessel, either a LNG or petro-chemical tanker (something carrying chlorine or ammonium nitrate, for example) and its detonation in Singapore harbor. Alarmingly, in late 2003, there were three pirate attacks on chemical vessels. Singaporean authorities have provided naval escorts to some ships in their limited territorial waters, but there is little more they can do.

Southeast Asian pirates have boarded vessels to rob them, hijacked them, and/or bring them to port in order to steal their cargo and repaint them. This raises two questions: First, do terrorists have the capability to hijack ships and sail them into ports? Second, are there repainted vessels, so-called phantom ships, available on the black market for terrorist organizations to purchase and load with explosives?

Container and Port Security

Some 230 million containers move through the world's ports each year, and some 90 percent of world's general cargo is in containers. Yet, less than 1 percent of containers are screened annually worldwide. At any given time there are 800 ships and some 150,000 containers in Singapore alone. The ability to inspect a mere fraction of these ships or containers is negligible, even in modern, efficient and trade dependent hubs such as Singapore. Fierce competition between ports and intense pressure to lower costs makes increasing security difficult.

Singapore is one of 20 foreign ports now part of the U.S.-led Container Security Initiative (CSI), designed to use intelligence and data bases to identify potentially dangerous or suspicious cargo, increase sensors on containers, and develop secure containers. Importantly, the screening will be done over-seas before the cargo reaches U.S. ports. Singapore hopes that the U.S. will eventually require all imported cargo to be screened over-seas, thereby giving it a competitive advantage over Malaysia, which has resisted the CSI.

The fact that containers would be the most efficient and effective means to get a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) or dirty bomb into the United States drives the CSI. While there is no evidence that al-Qaeda has WMDs, there is ample evidence of their interest in acquiring them. They have tested poisons and chemical gases, and al-Qaeda's anthrax production was to be based in Malaysia before its fortuitous shut down.

Finally, attention should be devoted to terrorist recruitment among seafarers. The Philippines and Indonesia are the two largest suppliers of the roughly 1.2 million seafarers in the world. Woeful regulation over international mariners given liberal landing and travel rights should remain a concern.

Flags of Convenience

The intelligence community has identified some 15 cargo ships around the world believed to be owned or controlled by al-Qaeda. However, these vessels, owned by a myriad of shell companies, are constantly renamed and re-registered. Used to move men, materiel and generate revenue through legitimate cargo forwarding and illegitimate practices such as drug, people and gun smuggling, these vessels may well be used as weapons in a terrorist attack.

Cambodia has emerged as the flag of convenience registry of choice, with several cargo vessels believed to have belonged to al-Qaeda in the past registered there. The So San, intercepted by Spanish forces while trying to covertly deliver North Korean missiles to Yemen in 2002, also came from Cambodia.

The Cambodian Registrar, run under license by a shadowy private company in Singapore since 1995, was under intense scrutiny following a series of scandals regarding several of its 1,600 ships. Under U.S., European and Korean pressure, the Cambodian government withdrew the license in August 2002, giving control to another foreign contractor.

Maritime terrorism makes up part of al-Qaeda's arsenal and a core part of its long-term strategy. Since 9/11, al-Qaeda's modus operandi has been to encourage its affiliated groups to attack economic targets. Moreover, every attack since 9/11, excluding Madrid, has transpired in moderate Muslim countries allied with the United States. Indonesia and Malaysia clearly fit the bill: important, trade dependent, exporters of oil and natural gas, straddling one of the most important maritime chokepoints in the world.

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