

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Addressing the Persistent Problem of Piracy and Sea Robbery in Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup>**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Individual and multilateral efforts by Southeast Asian states to improve maritime security over the past decade have achieved significant progress.
- But the problem of piracy and sea robbery persists. While the majority of reported incidents are comparatively minor, the overall number of attacks has risen over the past five years and has included hijackings for cargo theft by criminal syndicates and kidnappings for ransom by groups linked to Islamic militants.
- In response to the rising number of reported incidents, regional states have enacted measures to improve maritime security in areas under their jurisdiction. Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, for example, have agreed to launch coordinated naval patrols in the Sulu Sea.
- Further measures are required, however: Indonesia needs to operationalize a national coast guard; regional states need to tackle the land-based root causes of the problem; external powers should step up capacity building support; and ASEAN needs to adopt a more proactive role in the fight against piracy and sea robbery.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at *Anti-Piracy Cooperation in Southeast Asia*, a conference jointly organized by the Asia Foundation and the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Hanoi, 11-13 January 2016. The paper also draws on some of the discussions and recommendations made at that conference. The author would like to thank the conference organizers for permission to republish, Sam Bateman, John Bradford and Collin Koh for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper and Asyura Salleh for preparing the graph.

## INTRODUCTION

The spate of kidnappings for ransom in the Sulu Sea by armed gangs with links to Islamic militants in April and May, together with a series of incidents over the past three years in which criminal syndicates hijacked small oil tankers and siphoned off their cargoes for sale on the black market, has refocused attention on the perennial problem of piracy and armed robbery against ships in Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past decade, much has been achieved in the fight against maritime crime in the region. Southeast Asian states have put in place measures to improve security in their ports and anchorages, established coordinated naval patrols and information-sharing networks, and received capacity-building support from the major powers such as the United States and Japan. And yet the problem of piracy stubbornly persists.

This paper examines the nature of piracy and sea robbery in Southeast Asia, the effectiveness of state and regional responses to it, and what more can be done to address the problem.

## STATE, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES IN THE 2000s

Piracy emerged as a prominent security concern in Southeast Asia after the end of the Cold War. The International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Centre (IMB-PRC) in Kuala Lumpur recorded a steady rise in the number of reported incidents of piracy and sea robbery throughout the 1990s, and then a dramatic jump towards the end of the decade and into the early 2000s: from 94 incidents in 1998 to 257 in 2000 and 187 in 2003.<sup>3</sup> The problem was given added international prominence following the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Security analysts became concerned that terrorist groups might take advantage of the lax security environment to hijack oil or natural gas tankers and use them as "floating bombs" in major ports, or sink hijacked ships to disrupt vessel traffic in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore (SOMS) which serve as vital arteries of global commerce.

The rise in piracy and sea robbery incidents was generally attributed to a combination of factors. These included poor socio-economic conditions, weak governance and the lack of state capacity—especially in Indonesia following the downfall of the Suharto regime in 1998—as well as the widespread availability of new technologies to maritime criminals, such as satellite navigation, mobile phones and the internet.

In response to international pressure to crack down on the problem, the SOMS littoral states—Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore—initiated a series of measures designed to enhance security in their ports, territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and, in July

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<sup>2</sup> Under international law, an act of piracy is defined as an illegal act of violence or detention involving two or more ships on the high seas i.e. outside a coastal state's 12 nautical mile territorial waters; acts of maritime depredation which occur within a state's territorial or archipelagic waters are known as sea robbery, or armed robbery against ships, and are subject to the national jurisdiction of the state.

<sup>3</sup> *Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships Annual Report* (London: International Maritime Bureau, various issues 1999 to 2004).

2004, launched trilateral naval patrols in the vital waterway. The Malacca Straits Patrols (MSP) consist of three elements: coordinated naval patrols; combined aerial patrols; and the institutionalization of information and intelligence exchange. In 2008, Thailand joined the MSP. Despite initial concerns that the high costs of maintaining the year-round operation might lead to “patrol fatigue”, the participating states have remained committed to the MSP and, as will be discussed later, have discussed enlarging their geographical coverage to other areas.

Non-regional countries also played an important role in helping Southeast Asian states tackle piracy and sea robbery. Post-9/11, the United States funded a chain of coastal radar stations in Indonesia and the Philippines, and provided other kinds of capacity-building support to regional states including training and equipment. In 2004, at Japan’s initiative, 14 Asian states —eight ASEAN members, China, South Korea, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka— signed the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combatting Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP).<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately two key Southeast Asian states, Indonesia and Malaysia, citing unspecified sovereignty concerns, refused to sign. In 2006 ReCAAP established an Information Sharing Centre (ISC) in Singapore. The primary role of the ISC is to improve incident response by member states by facilitating communication, information exchange and operational cooperation among designated national focal points (usually coast guards or navies). Despite not signing the agreement, designated agencies in Indonesia and Malaysia have cooperated with the ISC since its inception.

The ISC also provides statistical analysis of the piracy and sea robbery situation in Asia, and supports capacity-building efforts to improve member states’ ability to prevent and respond to incidents of maritime violence. The ISC has been praised for providing a more accurate and nuanced picture of the piracy and sea robbery situation in Asia than the IMB-PRC. Unlike the reporting centre in Kuala Lumpur, the ISC classifies incidents into four categories depending on the intensity of violence, the treatment of the crew, the number of attackers involved and the weapons carried, and the property stolen from the vessel. As Sam Bateman has argued, because the IMB-PRC figures do not distinguish between the severity of attacks, they tend to give a distorted picture of maritime violence in Southeast Asia as the majority of incidents are opportunistic and involve petty theft.<sup>5</sup> A distorted picture not only hinders accurate risk assessment and effective responses to the problem by the relevant agencies, but also undermines business confidence in regional states’ ability to address piracy and sea robbery and results in higher vessel insurance rates.

In 2009, international collaboration received a further boost with the establishment of the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) at Changi Naval Base in Singapore. The aim of the IFC is to develop a shared maritime security picture for Southeast Asia among the 23 participating countries’ coast guards and navies. The IFC cooperates with both the MSP and the ISC.

These national, regional and international initiatives were credited with a dramatic improvement in security in Southeast Asian waters in the second half of the 2000s. According to the IMB-PRC, the number of reported incidents fell from 170 in 2004 to 68

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<sup>4</sup> Since 2004, the number of contracting parties to ReCAAP has risen from 14 to 20 to include the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Bateman, “Piracy Monitoring Wars: Responsibilities for Countering Piracy”, *RSIS Commentary*, No. 115/2015 (13 May 2015).

in 2009 (or 51.7% of global attacks to 16.8%), while the ISC recorded 71 incidents in 2009, down from 111 in 2005 (see Tables 1 and 2).

By the end of the decade, the locus of the world's piracy problem had shifted decisively, and dramatically, to the waters off Somalia where heavily armed and highly organized criminal gangs hijacked ships and held their crews and cargoes for ransom.

**Table 1: Piracy and Sea Robbery Incidents in Southeast Asia as Reported to IMB-PRC 2000-15**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Indonesia	119	91	103	121	94	79	50	43	28	15	40	46	81	106	100	108
Malaysia	21	19	14	5	9	3	10	9	10	16	18	16	12	9	24	13
Straits of Malacca and Singapore	80	24	21	30	46	19	16	10	8	11	5	12	8	10	9	14
South China Sea	9	4		2	8	6	1	3		13	31	13	2	4	1	
Philippines	9	8	10	12	4		6	6	7	1	5	5	3	3	6	11
Thailand	8	8	5	2	4	1	1	2		2	2				2	1
Myanmar	5	3			1				1	1		1				
Vietnam	6	8	12	15	4	10	3	5	11	9	12	8	4	9	7	27
Cambodia																
Total for Southeast Asia	257	165	165	187	170	118	87	78	65	68	113	101	110	141	149	174
Global	469	335	370	445	329	276	239	263	293	406	445	439	297	264	245	246
Southeast Asian Incidents as % of Global Incidents	54.8	49.3	44.6	42	51.7	42.8	36.4	29.7	22.2	16.8	25.4	23	37	53.4	60.8	71

Source: *Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships Annual Report* (London: International Maritime Bureau, various issues 2000-15). Figures include actual and attempted attacks.

**Table 2: Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships Incidents in Southeast Asia as Reported to ReCAAP-ISC 2005-15**

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
<b>Indonesia</b>	73	49	40	23	19	47	49	72	90	48	22
<b>Malaysia</b>	2	11	8	13	15	18	17	11	6	5	4
<b>Singapore</b>						2	3	2			
<b>Straits of Malacca and Singapore</b>	16	13	7	10	9	8	26	13	12	48	104
<b>South China Sea</b>	9	3	6	7	13	25	18	7	11	42	11
<b>Philippines</b>		5	6	8	5	5	6	3	5	5	8
<b>Thailand</b>	1	1	1		2	1					1
<b>Myanmar</b>							1				
<b>Andaman Sea</b>											1
<b>Vietnam</b>	10	3	5	12	8	13	8	4	9	6	27
<b>Total</b>	111	85	73	73	71	119	128	112	133	154	178

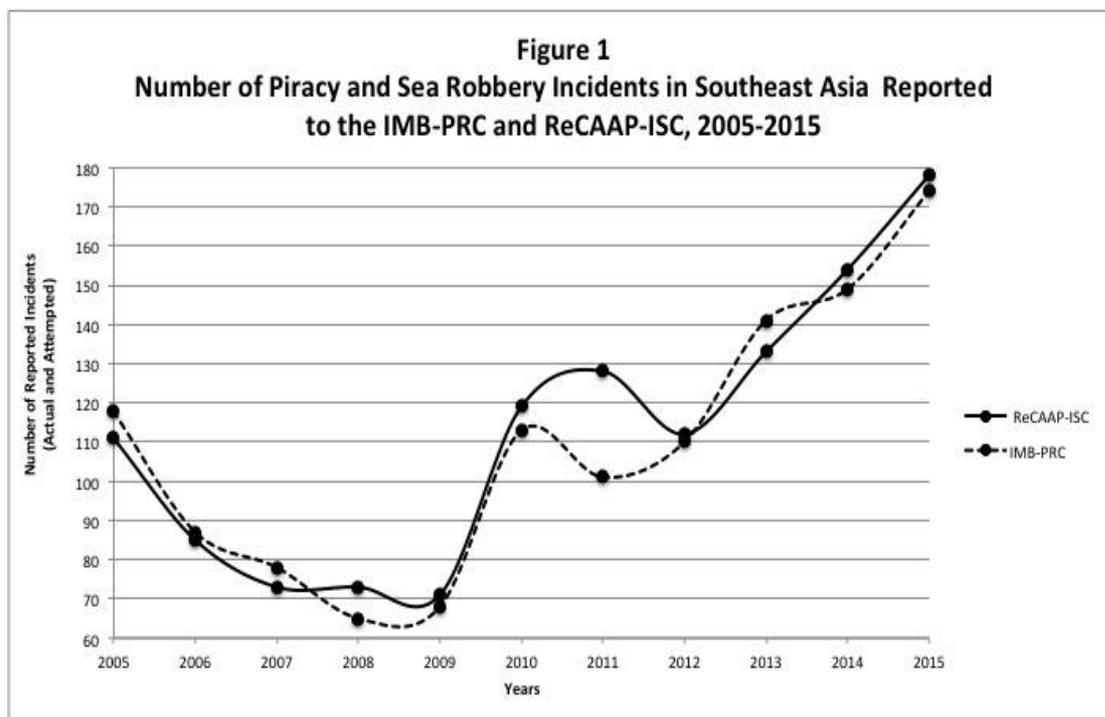
Source: *Annual Report* (Singapore: ReCAAP-ISC, various issues 2007-15). Figures include actual and attempted attacks.

### THE RISE OF PIRACY AND SEA ROBBERY INCIDENTS SINCE 2010

The piracy problem off the Horn of Africa was eventually resolved due to a combination of international naval cooperation, the adoption of counter-piracy measures by the shipping industry, capacity-building support for regional states and the restoration of a semblance of political stability in Somalia. In 2015, not a single incident off Somalia was reported to the IMB-PRC.

But as the number of attacks off the Horn of Africa declined, Southeast Asia experienced an upsurge in reported incidents (see Figure 1). According to the IMB-PRC, the number of attacks in the region increased from 68 in 2009 to 174 in 2015—or from 16.8% to 71% of global attacks (see Table 1). The ISC data showed a similar trend: 178 attacks in 2015 up from 71 in 2009 (see Table 2). The IMB expressed concern, as did the shipping industry which even accused ReCAAP of downplaying the problem.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> “Southeast Asia remains hot spot for pirate attacks”, *Straits Times*, 22 April 2015; Sam Bateman, “Impact of Lower Oil Prices: Increased Piracy in Regional Waters”, *RSIS Commentary*, No. 92/2015 (15 April 2015).



Sources: *Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships Annual Report* (London: International Maritime Bureau, various issues 2006-15); *Annual Report* (Singapore: ReCAAP-ISC, various issues 2007-15).

Although the IMB-PRC and ISC data demonstrate the same upward trend, they differ in the location of reported incidents. Over the past five years, the IMB-PRC has recorded a dramatic increase in acts of maritime violence in Indonesian waters—from 12 reported incidents in 2009 to 108 in 2015—but only a moderate increase in incidents in the SOMS over the same period (see Table 1). On the other hand, the ISC data shows a sustained increase in the number of incidents in Indonesian waters from 2010 to 2013, followed by a marked decline in 2014-15, but a dramatic spike in the number of attacks in the SOMS between 2014 and 2015: from 48 to 104 attacks (see Table 2). The discrepancy arises because the two centres allocate different geographical descriptors to the location of reported incidents. Perhaps due to regional sensitivities, the ISC prefers to use more neutral geographic descriptors such as the SOMS and South China Sea rather than emphasizing specific countries. Neither centre provides a definition of the geographical descriptors used in their reports.

As the ISC statistics demonstrate, the vast majority of incidents in Southeast Asian waters were opportunistic and involved acts of petty theft. However, during 2014 a worrying new trend emerged with a spate of incidents in which small product tankers were hijacked by well-organized (but lightly armed) criminal gangs, and their cargoes of marine fuel oil siphoned off and transferred to other vessels for sale on the black market. According to the ISC, three such incidents took place in 2013, rising to 15 in 2014 and 12 in the first eight months of 2015 (of which two were prevented).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> ReCAAP, IFC and RSIS, *Guide for Tankers Operating in Asia Against Piracy and Annual Robbery Involving Oil Cargo Theft* (2015), p. 2, available at < <http://www.recaap.org/Portals/0/docs/Reports/2015/Guide%20for%20Tankers%20Operating%20i>

The ISC believes that these attacks occurred because the shipping industry has sought to take advantage of falling oil prices to make bulk purchases for stockpiling which has resulted in increased traffic in regional waters, of mainly old, slow and hence rather vulnerable vessels.<sup>8</sup> Smaller crews and growing demand for oil on the black market have exacerbated the problem. The ISC has alleged that the nature of the attacks indicates that several criminal syndicates are likely responsible for the hijackings, and that they have been furnished with “insider information” including the vessels’ planned routes and cargo manifests.<sup>9</sup> To prevent such attacks from occurring, the ISC has recommended that masters adopt proper ship security plans, install ship protection measures, provide enhanced crew training, avoid vulnerable areas and maintain confidentiality on the voyage route.<sup>10</sup> From September 2015 to April 2016, there were no reports of hijacking tankers for oil cargo theft. However, on 7 May 2016, pirates attempted to hijack the oil product tanker *Hai Soon 12* off the Indonesian island of Pulau Belitung in the Java Sea.

More worrying than the hijacking for oil incidents were three separate attacks in March and April 2016 in which 14 Indonesians and four Malaysian sailors were abducted and held for ransom by the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), a criminal-terrorist organization which has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). On 26 March, the ASG kidnapped 10 Indonesians from the tug boat *Brahma 12*; on 1 April it abducted four Malaysians from the tug boat *Massive 6*; and on 15 April the ASG attacked the tug boat *Henry* and took four Indonesian crew members hostage.<sup>11</sup> The 10 crew members of the *Brahma 12* were eventually released in May, after the ship owners reportedly paid a ransom of US\$1 million; the four members of the *Henry* were released a week later though it is unclear if a ransom was paid.<sup>12</sup>

The attacks all took place in the Sulu Sea in the southern Philippines, an area notorious for illegal maritime activities such as smuggling, piracy and trafficking in illegal narcotics, guns and people. The incidents revived concern over the nexus between piracy and terrorism. The ASG (and other terrorists groups in the southern Philippines such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front) have long been accused of engaging in maritime piracy as a means of generating income for their cause. In February 2004, the ASG was responsible for the deadliest maritime terrorism incident to date when it used a bomb to sink the *MV SuperFerry 14* in Manila Bay with the loss of 116 lives.

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n%20Asia%20Against%20Piracy%20and%20Armed%20Robbery%20Involving%20Oil%20Cargo%20Theft.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> “Special Report on Abducting of Crew from Tug Boats in Waters off East Sabah and South Philippines”, ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, SR 01/2016, available at <<http://www.recaap.org/Portals/0/docs/Reports/2016/Special%20Report%20on%20Abducting%20of%20Crew%20from%20Tug%20Boats%20in%20Waters%20off%20East%20Sabah%20and%20South%20Philippines.pdf>>.

<sup>12</sup> “Abu Sayyaf releases 4 more Indonesian sailors”, *Straits Times*, 12 May 2016.

## STATE RESPONSES TO RISING ATTACKS

It should be emphasized that regional cooperation to address the piracy problem in Southeast Asia has been working well over the past decade. The *Hai Soon 12* incident in May provided an excellent example of how effective this cooperation can be. When the owners of the vessel reported to the ISC that they had lost contact with the ship, the information was immediately relayed to Indonesian's Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) which then informed the Indonesian Navy (TNI-AL). The incident was also reported to the IFC which worked with the shipping company to track the missing vessel. Two days after the *Hai Soon 12* was reported missing, the TNI-AL located the vessel, boarded it, rescued the crew and detained nine Indonesian pirates.<sup>13</sup> In 2015, several other hijackings for theft of oil were thwarted due to cooperation and coordination between the ISC, IFC and the navies and coast guards of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

However, due to the rising number of incidents in Southeast Asia over the past few years, regional states have been exchanging views on how to enhance multilateral cooperation. Vietnam and Myanmar recently became observers to the MSP, and Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia have reportedly held discussions on expanding the geographical scope of the naval patrols to include southern areas of the South China Sea where a number of attacks have taken place. However, this is a sensitive geopolitical issue. Even though the incidents occurred outside of China's so-called "nine-dash line", naval patrols in the South China Sea might be seen by Beijing as an attempt by Southeast Asian states to reinforce their territorial and jurisdictional claims in the area. Singapore's Chief of Navy, Rear Admiral Lai Chung Han, alluded to this sensitivity when he mentioned that in relation to the idea of expanded patrols, "There is concern with the proximity to the contested claims of the South China Sea, and we certainly don't want those issues to be conflated."<sup>14</sup>

As tensions rise in the South China Sea, the dispute and piracy have to some extent become conflated. For instance, under the United States' Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), Washington will provide US\$425 million during 2015-20 to help Southeast Asian countries build "a shared maritime domain awareness architecture that will help countries share information, identify potential threats, and work collaboratively to address common challenges".<sup>15</sup> Common challenges include piracy and sea robbery, but the principal beneficiaries of the MSI—the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia—all have, to varying degrees, contested territorial or maritime boundary claims with China. While Washington maintains that it does not take a position on competing territorial claims, Beijing views the provision of such aid as partisan. Japan has also stepped up capacity-building support to several Southeast Asian countries at loggerheads with Beijing in the

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<sup>13</sup> "Arrest of Suspects in Hijacking of *Hai Soon 12*", ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, available at <[http://www.recaap.org/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?Command=Core\\_Download&EntryId=446&PortalId=0&TabId=78](http://www.recaap.org/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?Command=Core_Download&EntryId=446&PortalId=0&TabId=78)>.

<sup>14</sup> Titus Zheng, "Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore discuss joint patrols", *IHS Maritime 360*, 11 May 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Fact Sheet: US Building Maritime Capacity in Southeast Asia, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 17 November 2015, available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/17/fact-sheet-us-building-maritime-capacity-southeast-asia>>.

South China Sea, including providing the coast guards of the Philippines and Vietnam with ten and four patrol boats respectively.

The response to the ASG kidnappings has been swift, with Indonesia taking the lead. Its influential Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Luhut Pandjaitan, warned of the dangers of the Sulu Sea becoming a “new Somalia” and called for increased security cooperation among the affected states. Meeting in Yogyakarta on 5 May, the foreign ministers and chiefs of defence forces of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines agreed to launch coordinated naval patrols in the area, establish a national focal point to share information and intelligence, and set up a communication hotline among the three countries.<sup>16</sup> The coordinated patrols will be modelled on the MSP and officials from the three countries have agreed to set Standard Operating Procedures. Singapore, Thailand and Brunei may be asked to participate as observers. However, negotiations to establish the patrols will have to deal with several very sensitive issues, including the Indonesia-Malaysia dispute over overlapping claims to energy resources in the Ambalat area in the Celebes Sea (and scene of tense encounters between the two countries’ security forces in 2005 and 2009) and the Malaysia-Philippines dispute over Sabah.

Southeast Asian countries have implemented additional measures to enhance maritime security in areas under their jurisdiction. In response to the rising number of attacks in the SOMS, in August 2015, Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to establish Quick Response Teams composed of naval special forces and helicopters.<sup>17</sup> The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), the country’s coast guard, now randomly deploys armed personnel onboard government-linked companies’ vessels operating in Malaysian waters.<sup>18</sup>

The Indonesian Marine Police has established “secure anchorages” in 11 of the country’s ports and this has led to a reduction in incidents.<sup>19</sup> As was the case a decade ago, however, port security remains a problem in Indonesia (particularly due to corruption). Data from both the IMB-PRC and the ISC indicate that around 60 per cent of incidents in Southeast Asia in 2015 occurred in Indonesia.

A more effective response to maritime criminal activities in Indonesian waters continues to be impeded by a lack of resources, overlapping jurisdictions between government ministries and inter-agency rivalry. Twelve agencies are responsible for maritime security in Indonesia, principally the navy in the country’s EEZ, the marine police in territorial waters and the Sea and Coast Guard Directorate (KPLP) in ports. In 2005, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono established the Marine Security Coordinating Board (Bakorkamla)

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<sup>16</sup> Joint Declaration, Foreign Ministers and Chiefs of Defence Forces of Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines, On Immediate Measures to Address Security Issues in the Maritime Areas of Common Concern among Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, Yogyakarta, 5 May 2016. Available at <<http://www.kemlu.go.id/en/berita/Pages/Joint-Declaration-Foreign-Ministers-and-Chiefs-of-Defence-Forces-of-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines.aspx>>.

<sup>17</sup> “RMN collaborates with Indonesian navy to form quick response team”, *Borneo Post*, 12 August 2015.

<sup>18</sup> “Commandos to be deployed onboard random cargo ships: MMEA”, *New Straits Times*, 15 September 2015.

<sup>19</sup> *Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships: Report for the Period 1 January – 31 March 2016* (London: International Maritime Bureau, April 2016).

to coordinate the activities of the various agencies, but it was never very effective as it was chronically underfunded and understaffed, and had a difficult relationship with the KPLP which viewed it as a rival.<sup>20</sup> In 2008, legislation mandated the creation of an Indonesian Sea and Coast Guard (ISCG) that was envisaged to be the primary agency responsible for maritime security in Indonesia, but continued interagency rivalry and lack of political leadership to resolve the problem meant that the proposal languished.<sup>21</sup>

Maritime security is, however, receiving a great deal more attention under the leadership of President Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”), and this augurs well for an improvement in the country’s maritime law and order situation. In November 2014, Jokowi announced a Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) which comprises five pillars.<sup>22</sup> Although piracy and sea robbery are not specifically mentioned in the GMF concept, the problem falls under the ambit of the fourth and fifth pillars, namely maritime cooperation through diplomacy and building a strong maritime defence.<sup>23</sup> Much of the emphasis on the GMF—as well as media attention following the destruction of foreign fishing boats alleged to be operating illegally in Indonesian waters—has been on Jokowi’s determination to eradicate the problem of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing which, the government claims, costs Indonesian US\$25 billion a year in lost revenue.<sup>24</sup> To help address the problem, Jokowi announced in December 2014 the creation of a new maritime security agency, Bakamla, to replace Bakorkamla, which would have greater command authority, funding and maritime assets than its predecessor.<sup>25</sup> Better coordination, more funding and the operationalization of the ISCG should mitigate the piracy and sea robbery problem in Indonesian waters.

## TACKLING PIRACY/SEA ROBBERY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Since the early 2000s, Southeast Asian countries have introduced measures to enhance maritime safety and security in areas under their national jurisdictions, improved operational coordination among their navies and coast guards, created information sharing networks, and accepted capacity-building support from non-regional states. Despite these positive developments, over the past five years the number of reported incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships has steadily risen.

Even though the majority of incidents in Southeast Asia are comparatively minor, the increase in hijackings and kidnappings by armed assailants—especially those with links to Islamic militants—is a worrying trend and more needs to be done to make regional waters safer and more secure.

The barriers to improving cooperation among Southeast Asian states to address the problems of piracy and sea robbery are not insignificant. They include acute sensitivities

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<sup>20</sup> Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto and Siswanto Rusdi, “Maritime Security Agencies in Indonesia: More Not Merrier”, *RSIS Commentary* No. 001/2013 (2 January 2013).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Joko Widodo, “The Seas Should Unite, Not Separate Us”, *Jakarta Post*, 14 November 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Annual Press Statement, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, January 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Pisani, “Be careful what you wish for Indonesia”, *Nikkei Asia Review*, 27 January 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, “Indonesia’s Maritime Ambition: Can Jokowi Realize It?”, *RSIS Commentary* No. 044/2015 (4 March 2015).

over sovereignty, trust deficits between neighbouring states, differing definitions of the problem and levels of concern, limited resources and competing priorities, and geopolitical tensions and rivalries that involve extra-regional states.

Moreover, due to the geography of the region, uneven levels of socio-economic development and poor governance, maritime crime can never be completely eradicated in Southeast Asia. However, progress in three major areas can significantly help to improve security in regional waters.

1. *Addressing Root Causes:* Regional states need to focus greater attention on tackling the root causes of the problem, specifically reducing poverty and underemployment in coastal communities, eradicating corruption among port, navy and coast guard officials and closing down land-based maritime crime syndicates. Legal frameworks that deal with detentions, evidence gathering and prosecutions need improvement. Enhancing domestic inter-agency cooperation is essential, as is cooperation among regional land-based police forces.
2. *Strengthening Capacity-Building Support:* Extra-regional powers need to step up their capacity-building support for regional states, including training programmes and equipment transfer. Particular attention should be paid to helping coastal states improve their maritime domain awareness. India, and especially China, are major users of Southeast Asian sea lanes and should be encouraged to become leading providers of capacity-building support alongside the United States and Japan.
3. *ASEAN Leadership:* Almost all initiatives aimed at improving maritime security in Southeast Asia over the past decade have occurred outside the framework of ASEAN. Given its community-building efforts and aspirations for “Centrality” in the regional security architecture, ASEAN must adopt a more pro-active role in the fight against piracy and sea robbery in Southeast Asia.

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