Smaller vessels seen most at risk from piracy

Call to rethink strategy as many security issues appear to be local police problems

By DONALD URQUHART
[SINGAPORE] A new report on Malacca and Singapore Straits security identifying smaller coastal vessels as being most at risk of attack has led some experts to question whether current efforts to curb piracy and avert maritime terror are on target.

The paper put out by the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) said analysis of 10 years of data indicated "the majority of attacks are on the smaller, more vulnerable vessels carrying trade across the straits or employed on coastal trade on either side of the straits".

"Relatively few actual attacks occur on large mainline "through traffic" vessels, which are underway and transiting the straits", of which there were only two in all of 2005, according to the 35-page paper which was launched at a symposium yesterday.

Conventional wisdom in recent years has it that terrorists could take a page from the pirate's notebook and cripple the narrow waterway by targeting a large vessel like crude oil or LNG tankers to cause a collision or sinking, or turning a large tanker into a floating bomb to attack port infrastructure.

"I've always felt the greatest risk was an attack on a mainline vessel operating in the shipping lanes, but this report indicates it may be less of a risk than previously thought," said National University of Singapore professor and international maritime law specialist Robert Beckman, a panelist at the symposium.

Because of the coastal nature of the attacks, a lot of the security issues appear to be "local police problems rather than international issues", Prof Beckman said, and "this may lead us to rethink the nature of international cooperation in the straits".

Similarly, panelist and former Maritime & Port Authority of Singapore director for policy, Mary Seet-Cheng, echoed the "local police problem" idea, saying nearly 80 per cent of what are considered attacks in Indonesian waters actually occur in port.

The smaller vessels, defined as "local traffic" in the report, include smaller product and chemical tankers under 20,000 gross tonnes (GRT) feeder container vessels, tugs, and general cargo ships.

These vessels are most at risk because of their lower freeboard, slower speed, smaller crews and proximity to the shoreline away from high traffic areas.

At much less risk are the larger mainline vessels like oil and LNG tankers, container vessels, larger bulk carriers, ro-ro ships and cruise ships, which transit the straits via the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea.

The report also said there was little evidence of links between terrorist and pirate groups, understood to be the core impetus behind the London underwriting market's classification of the Malacca Strait as a war and terrorism risk.

It went on to say that "analysis shows that due to the relative vulnerability of smaller and slower vessels, the greatest threat to a port might, in fact, come from a small LPG or chemical tanker rather than large vessels, which tend to attract the most security attention at present".

Among the 21 recommendations for an action plan proposed by the report was a suggestion to focus on assisting port administrations, particularly Indonesia, in building up capacity to suppress piracy and other forms of maritime crime within anchorages and port approaches.

Although many of the recommendations have been made before, the report did provide a handful of new ideas, including the establishment of Joint Operation Zones covering the hot-spots where attacks repeatedly occur, such as the area immediately east of Bintan Island. These could include "surveillance and response operations by the forces of the littoral states and/or, more ambitiously, the forces of non-littoral countries".

This could be accomplished by expanding current bilateral joint patrol agreements to multilateral ones. "If we can find a mechanism to make that work a little better, it would hopefully have a very prompt effect in bringing the number of attacks down," said panelist Capt Pottegengal Mukundan, director of the International Maritime Bureau.

"It will also have the added benefit of building confidence between the law enforcement agencies of the countries working together in a limited area and hopefully leading on to greater things after that," he said.