

Terrorism at Sea: Maritime Security Challenges in South Asia

By

Professor Amal Jayawardane*

In recent years piracy and maritime terrorism have become growing threats in the Indian Ocean, which is the locus of important international sea lines of communication. The Indian Ocean, the world's third largest ocean, is of great strategic importance for the supply of crucial energy resources. About 40% of the global trade transits through the Indian Ocean. It provides major sea routes connecting the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific Ocean. The Indian Ocean cannot be considered an "open" space as its access is controlled by several choke points such as the Bab el Mandeb, the Straits of Hormuz, the Straits of Malacca, the Sunda, and Lombok-Straits. In a world increasingly dependent on foreign trade, it is necessary to keep these choke points open at all times. The disruption of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) will have disastrous consequences to the global economy. The purpose of this brief presentation is to analyze the nature of security challenges posed by asymmetric non-state actors, with special reference to South Asia.

Since the end of the 15th century, European powers with their mastery of the oceans began to dominate the sea lanes in the Indian Ocean. It was mainly their sea power which enabled them to colonize most of the countries in Asia and Africa. By the end of the 18th century the British gained singular command of the sea, and the Indian Ocean was transformed into a "British Lake." With the gradual withdrawal of the British bases from the East of Suez during the post-Second World War period, there emerged a super-power naval rivalry in the Indian Ocean. It was in this context that Indian Ocean countries felt that their newly gained independence would be imperiled by the super power naval rivalry and the growing militarization of the ocean. Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike submitted a proposal to the United Nations requesting that the Indian Ocean be converted into a zone of peace. The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2832 (XXVI) on Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, adopted on December 16, 1971, refers only to the naval forces of great powers. However, the original proposal submitted by Sri Lanka to the First Committee referred not only to the great powers but also to littoral powers. Under the pressure of powerful Indian Ocean countries, however, Sri Lanka's proposal was later changed and targeted only the naval forces of the great powers.¹

It is interesting to note that Sri Lanka's proposal made no reference to Non-State Actors as sources of potential threats to the peace and stability of the Indian Ocean region. This was

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- Prof. Amal Jayawardane, Executive Director, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS), Colombo, Sri Lanka.

¹ See, Gamini Keerawella, "Peace and Security of a Small State: Sri Lankan Responses to Superpower Naval Rivalry in the Indian Ocean, 1970-1977," in Shelton U. Kodikara (ed.), *South Asian Strategic Issues* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), PP. 186-187.

understandable because there were no considerable threats emanating from non-state actors at the time. The conventional threats to maritime security such as major-power rivalries and inter-state conflicts still continue. However, in recent years non-state actors have become a major source of insecurity in the Indian Ocean.

In the recent past there has been an upsurge of piracy attacks around the world which has caused estimated world wide losses of US\$13 to US\$16 billion per year. Ships have been attacked and hijacked particularly in the Gulf of Aden, along the east coast of Africa, the Bay of Bengal, and the Strait of Malacca. It has been reported that “the number of attacks within the first nine months of 2009 have already surpassed last year’s due to the increased pirate attacks in the Gulf of Aden and off Somalia. Between January and September the number of attacks rose to 306 from 293. The pirates boarded the vessels in 114 cases and hijacked 34 of them so far in 2009. Gun use in pirate attacks has gone up to 176 cases from 76 last year.”²

The term “piracy” has been used to refer to acts of robbery or criminal violence at sea committed by private parties. The distinction between piracy and maritime terrorism has now become increasingly blurred. Earlier piracy was carried out by non-political actors mostly for personal benefits. It is possible that terrorist groups are also resorting to piracy in order to finance their political organizations. There is ample evidence to show that terrorist organizations are involved in drug-trafficking and human smuggling as it is a lucrative business to raise funds for the purchase of arms. Both pirates and terrorist groups are linked with organized crime syndicates.

There were terrorist attacks even on war ships such as the USS Cole in October 2000 at Aden and the French Super tanker, MT Limburg off Yemen’s coast in October 2002. Some have expressed fears that a terrorist group, with the assistance of pirates, might even capture an oil tanker or a ship and blow it near a vital choke point severely disrupting the flow of sea traffic.

Situation in South Asia

South Asia and its surroundings constitute the hub of terrorist activities, and there is greater connectivity among terrorist groups. Cross-border terrorist networks are operating across the middle-East, Central Asia, South Asia, and South East Asia. A lucrative narcotic trade is being conducted originating from the Golden Crescent involving Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran and the Golden Triangle including Myanmar, Thailand and Laos.

Among the few terrorist organizations which have acquired maritime capabilities, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) stood as the most effective group.³ It has been described as the “world’s most militarily and technologically advanced terrorist organization.” The LTTE had

² “Piracy,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/piracy>.

³ . Arabinda Acharya & Nadeeka P. Withana, “Groups with Maritime Terrorist Capabilities in the Indian Ocean Region” in V.R. Raghavan & W. Lawrence S. Prabhakar (eds.), *Maritime security in the Indian Ocean region: Critical Issues in Debate* (New Delhi: Tata McGraw- Hill, 2008), PP. 204-207; Peter Lehr, “Asymmetric Warfare in the Indian Ocean: What Kind of Threat from What Kind of Actor,” *ibid.*, PP. 173, 178-179; . Also see, Rohan Gunaratna, “The Asymmetric Threat from Maritime Terrorism,” *Jane’s Navy International*, Oct 1, 2001.

developed its own naval combat unit called “Sea Tigers.” They attacked the Trincomalee naval base in October 2000 and sank a naval vessel and damaged several others after a three hour long battle. Another attack was launched in November 2006 against Dakshina Naval base in Galle using heavily armed gunboats and speed boats. A special squad called “Black Sea Tigers” was formed in 1990 to carry out suicide attacks. In July 1990, it carried out its first suicide mission attacking the navy’s command ship *Edithara*. The LTTE was also in the process of building its own mini submarine. When the LTTE was engaged in peace negotiations with the Sri Lankan government in 2003, it demanded that the Sea Tigers be accorded de facto naval status. India became very concerned about the presence of another “navy” in the Bay of Bengal.

The LTTE has been accused of hijacking several ships including the *Irish Mona* (in August 1995), *Princess Wave* (in August 1996), *Athena* (in May 1997), *Misen* (in July 1997), *Morong Bong* (in July 1997), *MV Cordiality* (in September 1997), *Princess Kash* (in August 1998), *MV Sik Yang* (May 1999) and *MV Farah III* (2007). It was reported that the LTTE had killed all five Chinese crew members on board after capturing the *MV Cordiality* near the port of Trincomalee.

The LTTE played a pioneering role in the development and the wide use of suicide bombing as a terrorist weapon. The LTTE added another dimension to its terrorist arsenal of weapons by acquiring air capability. The fleet strength of the Tamileelam Air Force (TAF) was limited to three light aircraft; however, the importance of the LTTE acquiring air capability should not be underestimated. Its pilots flew over nearly 400 km to conduct their missions and they showed the ability of flying their light aircraft very low below the radar horizon. This air power could have been developed as a lethal weapon to attack the Sri Lankan navy.

In the present context, it is not difficult for terrorist groups to organize their own fleets of ships while concealing their identity because their ships can be registered under the Flag of Convenience (FOCs). In fact, the LTTE developed its own fleet of ships which was used for commercial transportation as well as for drug trafficking and arms smuggling.

India assisted Sri Lanka in patrolling the Palk Straits. During the period 2006-2008, the Sri Lanka Navy rapidly developed its offensive capabilities by adopting the “Small Boats Concept.” It developed three categories of small craft which were better suited for facing the “wolf-pack” style suicide missions of the Sea Tigers. The navy also destroyed 8 ships carrying weapons to the LTTE during the period 2006-2008. The destruction of ships and the navy’s constant patrolling of the seas effectively cut off the supply of arms to the LTTE, considerably weakening its offensive capabilities. This is evident from the fact that in 2006 there were 21 engagements with the Sri Lanka navy each lasting nearly 12 hours; in 2007 there were eleven; and only two in 2008.⁴ As Tim Fish, a maritime reporter of the Jane’s Navy International has pointed out,

⁴ Sergei De Silva-Ranasinghe, “How Sri Lanka Won the Unwinnable War,” APDR, Vol. 35 (No. 7 (September 2009), P. 24.

“Bringing the conflict to a conclusion after 30 years war would not have been possible without the Sri Lanka navy (SLN.)”⁵

The military defeat of the LTTE and the dismantling of its military infrastructure have considerably reduced security threats in South Asia. The LTTE became a threat not only to Sri Lanka but also to other countries in the sense that its techniques were widely used and copied by other terrorist organizations. It had maintained close connection with other terrorist groups which used its shipping network.⁶

However, the elimination of the LTTE will not restore lasting peace in the country unless a political solution is found to the ethnic problem. Therefore, it is imperative that the Sri Lankan government will have to offer an acceptable political solution to the minority communities in the form of devolution of power.

In general ships, port facilities, oil and gas terminals are the targets of maritime terrorist attacks. Pakistan and the Maldives experienced another type of maritime terrorist attacks – the use of the sea coast by terrorists to gain access to the land for asymmetric warfare against state actors.

On November 26, 2008, a group of terrorists launched a series of shooting and bomb attacks across Mumbai, India’s financial capital, killing 164 people (including 26 foreigners) and wounding about 308 people. It was later revealed that 10 Pakistani nationals belonging to the Lashkar-e-Toiba, the Pakistan-based militant organization, traveled by sea from Karachi across the Arabian Sea; hijacked an Indian fishing vessel and killed its occupants; abandoned the fishing vessel a few miles away from the coast of Mumbai; got into an inflatable rubber dinghy and reached a fishing village called Machchimaar Nagar in Mumbai. They came with 10AK rifles, 60 loaded magazines, 200 grenades and several assembled explosives of RDX. It appears that they have aroused no suspicion among fishermen. They have gone in different directions each carrying at least 60 pounds of weight.⁷ As the Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram observed in his statement in the Lok Sabha, “the Mumbai terrorist attacks have brought into sharp focus the vulnerability of our coastline that extends to 7,500 kms and the imperative need to enhance maritime and coastal security.”⁸

India has a coastline of 7500 kilometers with 13 major and nearly 200 minor ports. There are thousands of ships and fishing boats operating in the sea; therefore, it is no easy task to check and monitor their movements. It was surprising that the terrorists aroused no suspicion among fishermen. According to some reports, however, villagers had reported this incident to police

⁵ “Other Nations Could Learn from Sri Lanka Navy’s Fight against the Tamil Tigers,” http://www.janes.com/media/releases/pc090227_1.shtml, Accessed on May 27, 2009.

⁶ Rohan Gunaratna, “Final Curtain for Prabhakaran,” http://www.thebottomline.lk2009/03/18/defence_col.htm

⁷ P.S. Das, “Coastal and Maritime security: Two sides of the same Coin.” <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/2009/07>, P. 6.

⁸ http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/document/papers/08_dec_12_HM_st.htm. Accessed on Oct. 15, 2009.

but received little response.⁹ It is clear that enhanced surveillance, gathering and sharing of information, and monitoring of activities at sea are extremely important even at local level. It is important to raise awareness among the coastal community of the possible terrorist threats from the. As Vice Admiral P.S. Das has observed: “the hundreds of fishing villages spread around the coast should be treated as an asset and not a liability. They should be inducted as the Government’s ‘eyes and ears’.”¹⁰

It has also been reported that U.S. officials had warned India of a potential maritime attack on Mumbai but the security situation after the attacks clearly showed that the authorities were not well prepared to handle the situation effectively. The terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 as well as the Lahore terrorist attacks in March 2009 once again pointed towards the poor coordination between the federal authorities and provincial authorities.

The Maldives is another country in South Asia which faced maritime threats in the past. In November 1998 a Sri Lankan guerilla group, hired by a Maldivian national, had arrived in a freighter in the seas off the Maldivian capital Male. Later they came to Male in speed boats and gained control of part of the capital, having killed 19 innocent Maldivians. With the help of the Indian paratroopers who arrived in Male 12 hours later, President Abdul Gayoom was able to regain full control of the capital.

In the background of Mumbai terrorist attacks of November 2008, there are renewed fears in Male of the possibility of terror attacks from sea. In August this year when the Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony met with the Maldivian President Mohammed Nasheed, he offered naval patrol and aerial surveillance assistance to Maldives. In promoting defence cooperation between the two countries, the Indian Navy and Coast Guard ships will be involved in a joint mechanism to face challenges from terrorism, drug trafficking and piracy.¹¹

South Asia also figures high in maritime piracy. A considerable number of piracy attacks have been reported in the territorial waters off Bangladesh.

Some Observations

1).The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy which was adopted by consensus in the UN General Assembly in 2006, has adopted a holistic approach towards counter-terrorism. Without limiting itself to a mere security and law-enforcement approach, the UN strategy also advocates measures to address conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. A long term approach to eliminate maritime threats in the Indian Ocean would require that countries in the region will have to find ways to treat the root causes of many problems in the region. The increase of pirate attacks off the coast of Somalia has a great deal to do with the near absence of state control in the country as well as its economic chaos. As mentioned earlier, the military defeat of the LTTE has considerably reduced maritime security threats in South Asia. However, the possibility of a re-emergence of such terrorist organizations cannot be ruled out unless a satisfactory political solution is found to the ethnic problem in the country. The end of the

⁹ “Mumbai Attacks,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008_Mumbai_attacks.

¹⁰ Das, “Coastal and Maritime Security,” PP. 8-9.

¹¹ “India and Maldives Agree to Step Up Defence Cooperation,” <http://frontierindia.net/wa/india-and-maldives-agree-to-step-up-defence-cooperation/418>

apartheid regime in South Africa has vastly improved the security environment of the Southern African region.¹²

2). SAARC countries are aware of the need to enhance their preparedness in facing maritime threats to their security. At the 31st Session of the Council of Ministers, the SAARC Foreign Ministers declared: “We reiterate our commitment to take steps, to share expertise and information about terrorists, their movements, their support facilities and their weapons, **bearing in mind in particular, the threats posed to maritime and coastal security** and to share information regarding the investigation and prosecution of terrorist acts.”¹³ However, the existing mechanisms such as STOMD & SDOMD are not geared to cater to the needs of a wide variety of sectors which are facing terrorist threats. Therefore, there is a critical need to create an integrated mechanism capable of gathering information/intelligence relating to key sectors which are of crucial importance from the perspective of national security.

3. In view of the transnational nature of modern terrorism, SAARC countries should also seek the support of other regional organizations. In fact, some of the South Asian countries have gained membership in other regional forums where discussions are taking place on issues such as terrorism, piracy, cross border crimes, drug trafficking, and arms smuggling. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka are members of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The ARF is a high level political and security forum, founded in 1994, to facilitate greater security and defense cooperation among countries within the Asia-Pacific region as well as those in Europe. SAARC countries can benefit from the ASEAN Anti-Piracy Pact which became operative since September 2006. This pact requires the signatories to cooperate in sharing information and intelligence on piracy and other threats to maritime security.

4. There is a strong naval presence of extra-regional countries as well as littoral countries in the Indian Ocean. While there is littoral resistance to extra-regional power presence, there is also intra-regional competition and rivalry among littoral powers. Competition among states for access and influence is unavoidable; however, it has become extremely important to develop cooperative maritime strategies to face common threats from asymmetric non-state actors. Indian Ocean countries have so far not developed a comprehensive collective security system to meet the challenges of maritime security and the development of such a system in the near future is not feasible. What is necessary at present is to evolve a functionalist framework of cooperation which would involve elements such as joint naval exercises, joint coast guard exercises, and joint patrols in the region; intelligence sharing, maritime surveillance and maritime capacity building.¹⁴ These measures are already in practice but at an uneven level. They need to be strengthened and all the countries should benefit from a cooperative maritime engagement on the part of extra-regional powers as well as littoral powers.

¹² Peter Lehr, “The challenge of Security in the Indian Ocean in the 21st Century,” South Asia institute, University of Heidelberg, Working paper No. 13, November 2002, P. 4.

¹³ SAARC Ministerial Declaration on Cooperation in Combating Terrorism.”

¹⁴ W. Lawrence S. Prabhakar, “The Evolving Issues, Templates and Challenges of Naval Transformation,” in Raghavan & Prabhakar (eds.), *Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean*, PP. 93-95.