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Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Tue, 09/18/2012 - 11:21

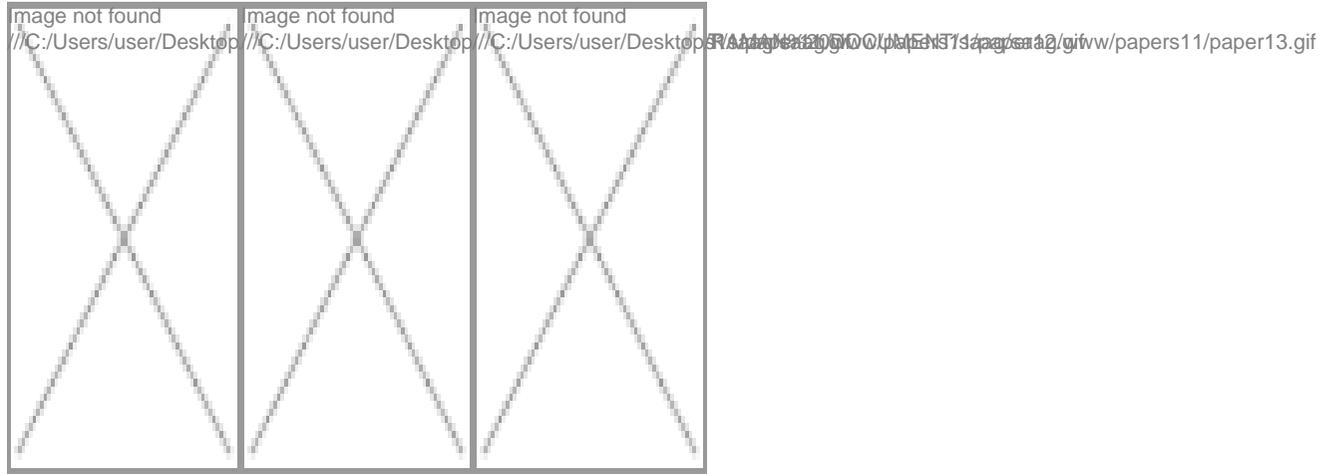
Paper no. 1033 18. 10. 2004

by C.S.Kuppuswamy

The Malacca Straits is in the news (for right or wrong reasons) for the last two months since the U.S proposed to intervene in the Straits of Malacca through its Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI). The U.S concern is on movement of cargo relating to WMD through the straits. The RMSI is part of the U.S Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) in the global war on terrorism. In South East Asia, Australia and Singapore are participants in the initiative (RMSI).

The Statistics

The littoral states of the Straits of Malacca are, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. The straits, situated between the coastline of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore to the East and the Indonesian island of Sumatra to the West (see map below), extends 600 miles (900 km) from its widest point (about 350 km between Northern Sumatra and Thailand) to its narrowest (less than 3 km wide between southern Sumatra and Singapore). At its shallowest, it has a reported depth of just 25 metres. According to the International Maritime Organisation, at least 50,000 ships sail through this strait every year. They transport about 30 per cent of the world's trade goods and 80 per cent of Japan's oil needs.



Map of Malacca Straits

According to the U.S Energy Information Administration (EIA), about 11 million barrels per day (b/d) currently passes through the Straits of Malacca, but that is set to climb as oil consumption in developing Asian nations rises by an estimated average of 3 per cent per annum. Thus the Straits of Malacca remain one of the most important shipping lanes in the world and that importance is expected to increase – specially in terms of oil transport.

The U.S initiative

Admiral Thomas Fargo, head of U.S forces in the Asia-Pacific in his testimony to U.S House Armed Services Committee had suggested that U.S troops might assist in patrolling the straits to deter terrorists who might target shipping in the Malacca Straits. This suggestion has been resented both by Malaysia and Indonesia. The matter also came up for discussion in an international conference on Asia in Singapore in the first week of June 2004. U.S Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in his speech at the conference “was very cautious in suggesting on the involvement of U.S troops in securing the straits, while nevertheless making it very clear that the country has strategic interest in the channel” (The Jakarta Post – June 9, 2004). While Admiral Fargo never really outlined a totally unilateral U.S military initiative, he did say “we are looking at things like high-speed vessels, putting special operation forces on high speed vessels, putting potentially marines on high

speed vessels to conduct effective interdiction”.

Reactions of littoral states

Malaysia. Malaysia feels there is no need for the presence of an extra regional force for the purpose of securing the straits and that such presence will impinge on the sovereignty of the country. Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar had a meeting with his Indonesian counterpart on May 7, at Jakarta to discuss the U.S proposal. Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz, minister in the P.M’s department announced in the parliament on 14 June, 2004 that Malaysia will have its own version of the U.S coast guard to patrol and safeguard security along the Straits of Malacca. This new paramilitary agency will begin operations in March 2005. It will be equipped with vessels and aircraft capable of operation around the clock.

Indonesia. Indonesia has also announced that it will set up a joint special task force to safeguard the Straits of Malacca. Admiral Bernard Kent Sondakh, Chief of Indonesian Navy, said he will hold talks with Malaysian authorities in the end of June 2004. He is also reported to have said that “Indonesia deems it not necessary to include troops from outside countries including United States – to be involved in safeguarding the strategic waterway” (The Jakarta Post – June 17, 2004). According to the admiral, what was needed from the U.S was “limited” to exchanges of intelligence information, equipment and training assistance. An Indonesian legislator from the House of Representatives Commission which oversees international relations is reported to have said that presence of foreign forces would be a humiliation to Indonesian sovereignty and tantamount to foreign intervention. Indonesia has also proposed the formation of an ASEAN maritime security cooperation forum at the conference held in Singapore.

Singapore. Singapore Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean said that it is an intensive and complex task to safeguard regional waters against maritime terrorism and that “no single state has resources to deal effectively with this threat”. In the International Conference on Asia in June 2004, Singapore proposed the idea of U.S Marines helping to patrol the vital waterway. Singapore is a participant of the Regional Maritime Security Initiative of the U.S. Malaysia and Indonesia resent Singapore’s support for a stronger U.S presence in the region and feels that Singapore is using the terrorist threat as a tool to justify the U.S presence in the region.

The Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA).

In an editorial of the Far Eastern Economic Review (June 17, 2004) it is mentioned that parties to the FPDA – Australia, Britain, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore – would increase training to prevent terrorist attacks along the Strait. The FPDA conceived in 1971 to protect Malaysia and Singapore from invasion has served no useful purpose till date and the chances of this arrangement becoming an effective instrument to safeguard the straits are very remote. Indonesia, one of the littoral states of this strait is also not a member of this arrangement.

Terrorist Threat in the Malacca Strait

Eric Watkins, an U.S journalist and a specialist on world oil, shipping and security issues has analysed the terrorist threat in the Malacca Straits. In his analysis he states that it is not surprising to note that the Malacca Straits is considered a prime target for terrorists bent on disrupting international commerce and strategic shipping lanes. The Al-Qaeda network, actually had video footage of Malaysian police patrols along the Straits of Malacca indicating their potential interest in attacking this waterway. During the interrogation of Abd al-Rahim al-Nashri of Al-Qaeda, an alleged specialist in maritime operations, the group's ability to attack shipping targets has come to light. The Australian government claims that the terrorists could be planning to attack South East Asia's shipping lanes including the Malacca Straits with a dirty bomb. A report by the International Maritime Bureau on the extent of piracy and terrorist activity in the area justifies the proposal of the U.S to deploy its forces in the straits.

Concluding remarks.

The Straits of Malacca is an international issue and safe passage has to be guaranteed under international law. Hence it is not correct to say that only the littoral states have the right to deal with issues concerning the security of this waterway.

The anti-American feelings of the people of Malaysia and Indonesia are precluding them from looking at the overall interests of the international community.

The Malaysian and Indonesian leadership are using the pretext of impingement of their sovereignty in trying to obstruct the deployment of a U.S force for the security of the strait but there has to be a balance between the security threats and sovereignty.

It has been established that Jemaah Islamiyah, the South East Asian terrorist network, with its major presence in Indonesia, has links with the Al-Qaeda network. With this the security of the Malacca Straits gains importance and requires immediate attention.

Singapore's stance in supporting the U.S initiative may be with some vested interests, but it is one of the affected littoral states and its concerns have to be considered. The Strait is at its narrowest near Singapore where a number of piracy cases have occurred.

As of now neither Malaysia nor Indonesia have the wherewithal to effectively carry out the surveillance of the straits and ensure security of this waterway. Hence the assistance of the U.S, if not by way of physical deployment of marines, is required for this purpose.

Since this issue is most likely to be taken up in the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and the ASEAN Regional Forum in the end of June 2004, a multi lateral body under the auspices of this association can be set up for this purpose which may perhaps be acceptable to all the affected parties.

As Eric Watkins sums it up, creation of a political foundation for operational cooperation based on a common perception of shared threat is the ideal solution for this problem.

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