

# MARITIME SECURITY

## IN

# SOUTHEAST ASIA



© Shutterstock

The Malacca Straits are one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

**T**he Malacca Straits are the narrow stretch of waterway that lies between Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and southern Thailand. From an economic perspective, the Malacca Straits are also one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. Nevertheless, historically it has also long been a haven to some of the world's most ruthless and prolific pirates.

### Modus Operandi

The pirate gangs within this region vary in size and have different modus operandi. Whilst some are content to inflict acts of petty theft and criminality on board passing ships, others are far more organised. Oil theft is commonplace, as is the looting of the crew's personal belongings. Some ships have been hijacked, given a new identity and later sold on the black market. Ships crews are often the victims of violence and brutality, and deaths arising from pirate attacks are not uncommon.

Unlike their counterparts in Somalia, their weaponry is somewhat primitive with knives and machetes being the most commonly used. These pirate groups are typically managed by 'godfathers' who are in charge of a number of varying crime syndicates. Feared within their local communities, these are powerful men in their own right. Their wealth is an extension of their power that can be used to bribe corrupt officials and maritime piracy isn't usually their sole source of income.

When launching attacks, the pirates capitalise on their knowledge of the local area. Indonesia is the largest littoral state in the region with approximately 13,000 islands. The long coastline and myriad of islands makes it difficult for law enforcement agencies to patrol. The use of fast boats and their ability to blend in amongst local fishermen presents the pirates with another advantage. Add to this the complexities regarding sovereign state territorial boundaries then the odds are often stacked in favour of the pirates.

### Joint efforts to combat piracy

This may give a perception that the pirates are running amok with impunity; not exactly. In 2004, the governments of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia joined together and showed their resolve and determination to tackle the pirates by combining their maritime resources to patrol the Straits. The impact of this joint operation had an immediate effect and dramatically curtailed the number of attacks in the region.

In Singapore, the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) was formed. This organisation provided an information sharing centre and a pivotal coordinating mechanism to prevent piracy. Technology has also been introduced, such as satellite based systems and airborne surveillance platforms, that enable pirates movements to be tracked.

However, despite the continued efforts and resources being poured into tackling piracy, the problem still persists. In the aftermath of the long and challenging struggle to contain Somali piracy, the number of global piracy incidents fell dramatically. However in contrast, in Southeast Asia the number of piratical incidents increased.

In 2014, the IMB reported that piracy in Asia accounted for 75 percent of the world's maritime piracy and robbery incidents. In 2015, the number of attacks in the region reached a ten-year peak. In 2016, a total of 129 types of pirate incidents occurred in Asia. The second most popular region

The problem of maritime piracy in Southeast Asia is as old as piracy itself. Although many associate the scourge of modern piracy with the waters surrounding Somalia, for the past few years Southeast Asia has had the unenviable title of being the global piracy hotspot. Security expert Ed Hill reports.

for pirate activities was West Africa which saw only 95 incidents.

### Decrease of attacks

This worrying trend led to increased efforts to curb the amount of attacks and in 2017 ReCAAP reported that piratical incidents in Southeast Asia fell to a ten-year low. From January to November 2017, the 86 recorded incidents represented a decrease of 21% compared to the 104 incidents recorded over the same period in 2016, and a 60% decrease from the 217 incidents logged in 2015.

Nevertheless, the reduction in the number of incidents does not mean that the waters of Southeast Asia are now safe. Pirate gangs remain very active and are alert for any opportunist target that may present itself. Seafarers must therefore take full responsibility for the safety and security of their vessel. As a minimum, ship protection and hardening measures should be utilised and a 24-hour pirate watch should be employed. In addition, a citadel should be in place giving the crew a designated safe room to retreat to in the event that the boat gets boarded by pirates. If in doubt then seek external expert security advice.

Despite recent successes against piracy in Southeast Asia, it is highly unlikely that piracy incidents will drop to a low or moderate threat level in the short to medium term. The war on piracy is slowly being won however ships should take full responsibility for their own security.

Ed Hill is a Managing Director of Intrepid Risk Management, a company that specialises in superyacht security. A former Royal Marines Commando with a Masters Degree in Maritime Security, Ed regularly speaks at conferences discussing security matters and has appeared on television.