



Expansion in intra-Asian shipping could lead to increase in hijackings around Malaysia, Indonesia

Five maritime hijackings took place off Malaysia and Indonesia's coasts since mid-April. During the most recent incident on 7 June, armed hijackers took over the Malaysia-registered tanker off the Sarawak coast, siphoned off fuel, robbed the crew of their possessions and escaped. These thefts come at a time when many global shipping companies are looking to profit from the shipping boom in the intra-Asian trade routes. The desire by large shipping companies to break into this regional market will attract more criminals and likely increase the number of actual and attempted hijackings in the area.

Costco and Yang Ming are examples of large shipping companies that are teaming up with regional carriers as part of vessel sharing agreements to take advantage of the roughly 30 million containers that are moved across intra-Asian trade routes every year. The intra-Asian shipping lines shipped 7.2 million Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit (TEU) in 2013, a 9% increase from the year before. The continued growth of the Asian markets will likely see an increase in both the amount of cargo moved and the number of interested parties. The increase in global shippers vying for intra-Asian routes and services will drive down shipping costs and increase the number of vessels on the water, which in turn could increase the number of opportunities for criminal groups looking to hijack vessels.

Competition amongst criminal groups and hijackers could increase the frequency, boldness and violent nature of actual and attempted attacks. Pirates in the region often target ships that have recently departed from ports off the coasts of Indonesia, Malaysia and in the Singapore Strait. This indicates that pirates have knowledge of ship departures, communications and routes as well as the infrastructure and knowledge of how to unload cargo quickly and surreptitiously. This may suggest that hijackers paid off company employees, dockworkers or port officials for the information.

Furthermore, the increase in ship numbers and limited unloading areas in SE Asian ports could force arriving ships to berth out in the bays and inlets (where vessels are most vulnerable) for longer periods of time (and possibly in more isolated areas) as they wait their turns to unload. Hijackers monitoring ship movements could shadow these ships, quickly scramble aboard, disable equipment, tie up crew members and sail ships to isolated areas where cargo can be safely unloaded.

Despite patrols and increased collaboration, the Strait of Malacca and the bays and inlets around Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia are still pirate hotspots and dangerous places for ships docking in or transiting the area. Shipping companies looking to break into the intra-Asian shipping market must factor in these dangers when considering routes, ports and cargo. If high-risk port calls and cargo are chosen, escalation procedures must be established and rehearsed between crew and shipping company officials and local authorities. Piracy and thefts in the region will continue as long as criminals can get away with their crimes. The desire by large shipping companies to break into this regional market will attract more criminals and likely increase the number of actual and attempted hijackings in the area.

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