

# The nature and trends of global maritime security



From Shanghai to Southampton, commercial shipping runs the gauntlet between pirates, terrorists and traffickers. But how real are the dangers of lawlessness at sea?

## THE RISE OF MARITIME TERRORISM

### The attacks on the New York World Trade Center, in September 2001,

clearly demonstrated the existence of a coherent terrorist strategy to strike at high-profile targets and cause mass civilian losses. Perhaps just as significantly, the attack was also aimed at destabilising the business community. Company boardrooms around the world were forced to recognise their own vulnerability and put in place, at great cost, systems to ensure they could continue to operate if such an



French registered MV Limburg attacked by al-Qaeda in October 2002

attack were to happen to them. Subsequently, the Zodiac speedboat attack on the French oil tanker, the MV *Limburg*, as it was approaching the Minah Al-Dabah oil terminal in the Gulf of Aden, on 6 October 2002, highlighted the disturbing realisation that the terrorist threat had spread to the seas.

Not surprisingly, oil is one of the prime targets for the terrorists, who are well aware of the potential it offers for them to inflict panic in the world's stock exchanges and paralysis in governments worldwide. Currently, the main battleground is concentrated in the Middle-East, specifically in and around the Arabian Gulf. The raid on the *Limburg* was al-Qaeda's first success against an oil-tanker and served notice that the terrorists had mastered the art of penetrating harbour security systems and engaging a large twin-hulled vessel,

using speedboats – a tactic employed two years earlier to hole the destroyer USS *Cole* in the Port of Aden.

Following that episode, there have been a number of speedboat attacks on tankers anchored off the Al-Basra Oil Terminal at the mouth of Iraq's Basra port. In April 2004, insurgents managed to detonate explosive-laden boats near a tanker moored alongside the terminal, forcing the authorities to shut the terminal down immediately while they undertook damage assessment.

A year after the *Limburg* attack, a worrying incident took place off

the coast of Sumatra, when a 3,900-ton chemical tanker, the *Dewi Madrim*, was hijacked by a dozen men in black clothes and balaclavas who overwhelmed the sleeping crew, made for the bridge and disabled the ship's radio.

For over an hour, the group watched as their leader took control of the vessel and appeared to practise a set of manoeuvres that showed a familiarisation with the ship's equipment, including the radar. Then, as quickly as they appeared, they vanished. The assault had all the hall marks of a dry-run exercise for a later mission.

The speedboat attack is not the only method the terrorists have explored. There is credible evidence that individuals with links to al-

Qaeda have undergone scuba-diving training to learn how to attach explosives to ship hulls. Confirmation of this came to light after the capture and interrogation of an alleged member of the Philippine Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which has long-standing connections to al-Qaeda. It was the ASG that claimed responsibility for the deadliest terrorist attack at sea, after a bomb it had planted in a television set exploded onboard the MV *SuperFerry 14*, killing more than 100 people off the coast of Manila in February 2004.

Recent reports in the UK press have asserted that, after years of retrenchment, al-Qaeda now appears to be trying to re-establish itself in key countries in and around the Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. If successful, there would be an almost unbroken line of coastal nations, from Indonesia ►



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to Morocco, harbouring terrorist elements with a theoretical capability of attacking shipping along the main choke-points from the Strait of Malacca, along the Arabian Gulf, through the Suez Canal and into the Mediterranean.

### **Piracy in decline?**

According to the International Chamber of Commerce – International Maritime Bureau (ICC-IMB), 2006 was the third year in a row in which the number of acts of piracy has fallen. In addition, attacks in the first quarter of 2007 were 20% below the figure in the same period of 2006.

This decline, however, is the result of a concerted, co-ordinated and collaborative effort by the international community, and not evidence that piracy is no longer an attractive and lucrative activity. The establishment, in 1992, of the IMB Piracy Reporting Centre (PRC) in Kuala Lumpur has helped to develop a systematic method of monitoring, recording and countering pirate incidents. Naval forces worldwide have also responded to a louder call from the maritime business community for their assistance. This military response has been complemented by foreign policy initiatives in the main piracy hotspot of South-East Asia, resulting in the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), which came into force in September 2006.

Finally, the 2004 tsunami is responsible, to some degree, for the reduction of pirate strikes in the region, as it destroyed many of their boats. Concerted anti-piracy operations in one sector, however, have been countered by an increase in pirate activity in other less well-patrolled areas. For example, the reduction in pirate attacks in the Strait of Malacca and off the coast of Somalia has to some extent been offset by an upsurge in raids along the coastlines of Nigeria and Bangladesh.

Despite the welcome reduction in piracy, there is an alarming rise in the level of sophistication in the assets, weaponry and tactics employed in recent incidents. The attack on the *Seabourn Spirit*, on 5 November 2005, was undoubtedly a taste of things to come. At around 5:30am, two pirate speedboats were winched, by crane, from their ocean-going mothership and headed off for the luxury cruise liner, which was sailing more than 100 miles off the coast of Somalia. Having fired a rocket-propelled grenade through one of the passenger's cabins, the speedboats began to pepper the side of the ship with machine-gun fire. It was only the quick-thinking of the captain and his crew which prevented the pirates getting on board the ship, and eventually the *Seabourn Spirit* managed to outrun the pirates.

Pirates, however, do not just target the affluent in search of cash and jewellery. A favoured tactic is to seize a ship, and take all the cash

from the safe and crew before renaming and re-registering the vessel and selling off the cargo to some 'unsuspecting' buyer.

Another source of income for the pirates is ransom money, for the crew and/or ship – and pirates display an unbelievably cynical attitude to target selection. During 2005, ships carrying famine relief for the World Food Programme were hijacked and held for ransom. On 13 October 2005, the MV *Mitzlow* was seized, forced to sail from Merka Port in Somalia, still holding half of its cargo of food aid, and held for ransom. A similar episode had taken place four months earlier, when the MV *Semlow's* agent was reportedly asked to pay US\$500,000 for the release of the crew and ship, which was en-route to Somalia to deliver food aid. Eventually, the UN felt it could no longer risk the lives of any more people and was forced to put a halt to the shipborne relief operation in May 2007, after another of its chartered ships, the MV *Rozen*, was seized by pirates two months previously.

An event, equally as disturbing, took place in March 2005, in the narrow sea lane between Indonesia and Malaysia known as the Strait of Malacca, when 35 pirates with rocket-launchers stormed the 1,289-ton MT *Tri Samudra*, full to the brim with methane gas. This attack blurs the lines between the terrorist and the pirate threat. The perpetrators are widely held to have been members of the Indonesian Free Aceh Movement (GAM), but the incident itself appeared to be modelled on a classic pirate action as the ship's captain and chief engineer were held for ransom, no doubt to raise money for arms purchases. The cargo, however, would have been particularly useful in a terrorist attack on a port.

### **Trafficking is a threat to commercial shipping**

Commerce thrives best under stable conditions, but stability requires governments to exercise control and maintain order. However, a state's ability to wield control is eroded by drug smuggling and people trafficking. This is not only because of the illegal infrastructure, which enriches the very people governments would least like to see becoming wealthy, but also because trafficking creates a significant 'rogue' population within the recipient countries, which exists on the fringes of society. In addition, it produces porous borders, which are open to the exploitation for other illegal activities, in particular, the movement of terrorists and other criminal elements.

In January 2007, the European Commission gave one of its strongest warnings ever that Europe was about to experience a fresh and huge wave of illegal immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, and urged the EU to do more to counter this phenomenon. What wasn't said, however, was that terrorism, piracy and trafficking are rapidly merging into the same threat, with commercial shipping being the major casualty. Action against one is of questionable use without action against all three. The only organisations capable of doing this, however, are maritime forces. ■