Maritime Transport and Security

The Growing Significance of Coast Guards in the Asia-Pacific: A Quiet Development in Regional Maritime Security

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INTRODUCTION

The maritime security scene in the Asia-Pacific region is currently volatile. By 2009, regional countries may be spending a combined US$14 billion on new naval ships or almost double the figure for 2003.¹ New naval acquisitions include “state of the art” submarines, larger surface warships and even aircraft carriers, although some other name, such as large amphibious ship, might be used to describe them. This activity is not just a consequence of concerns about the threat of maritime terrorism and ongoing problems of law and order at sea, particularly piracy and armed attacks against ships, but is also due to lingering bilateral tensions that occasionally re-surface, especially in the context of disputed claims to sovereignty over islands or offshore areas.² These developments all serve to add to maritime insecurity in the region.

It is all too easy to say that economic growth and a desire to assert greater control over adjacent waters, particularly exclusive economic zones (EEZs), are driving naval developments in the region. While this may have been true in the 1990s and earlier, these developments now appear to be driven much more by direct perceptions of threats and maritime insecurity. Some regional navies, which previously had only limited coast guard-type functions, are building up enhanced offshore capabilities—not only highly

². The first few months of 2005 have seen disputes flare up between South Korea and Japan over their separate claims to sovereignty over the Takeshima/Tokdo islands, and between Indonesia and Malaysia over hydrocarbon rights off Sipidan and Ligitan islands East of Borneo.

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capable surface combatants and submarines, but also significant numbers of aircraft for both maritime strike and surveillance. In the light of pessimistic threat assessments and general regional insecurity, regional navies are focusing more on their capabilities for war-fighting and are becoming reluctant to be too heavily involved in tasks that could be assigned to a separate coast guard. The latter tasks divert navies from the complex and expensive business of preparing for modern naval warfare. Employing high technology warships and maritime aircraft on policing tasks may be an “over-kill” and a misemployment of highly trained naval personnel. They may be better left to a separate coast guard, especially equipped and trained for maritime policing.

At one time it was thought that the extension of maritime jurisdiction and sovereign rights allowed under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) would provide justification for established navies to acquire more vessels, and for smaller nations to establish a navy. However, the extension of coastal State jurisdiction under UNCLOS has not had quite as much impact on naval force planning as was anticipated initially. In fact we are now seeing a different trend with most regional navies concentrating on their primary war-fighting role. Navies that had not previously had coast guards are establishing them, and those that already had coast guards are building them up. There are a number of reasons for this development. Navies are high-profile symbols of sovereignty whose employment in disputed maritime areas may be provocative. Cooperation between regional coast guards offers advantages for maritime cooperation and confidence building by overcoming some of the sensitivities that might inhibit the employment of navies.

The main geographical focus of this article is the Western Pacific and the seas of East Asia. This area has complex maritime geography with many islands and archipelagos, narrow straits and shipping channels with numerous overlapping claims to maritime jurisdiction and few agreed maritime boundaries. Shipping traffic is heavy and is increasing year by year, as economic growth in the region proceeds. Growing resource scarcities drive increased research for offshore oil and gas reserves and the over-exploitation of marine living resources. Southeast Asia, in particular, has