

KEEPING SHIPPING LANES SAFE

Masafumi Kuroki chats with AJ Leow about the need for multilateral sharing of information, in efforts to combat piracy and sea robbery in the region.

Masafumi Kuroki, Executive Director of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) Information Sharing Centre (ISC), has been a career diplomat at Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) for more than 40 years., including postings in Malaysia, Indonesia and Cambodia. Having also been Vice-President of the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the Deputy Director-General for the Trade and Economic Cooperation Bureau at Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, he has unique insights that are needed to effectively address cross-border cooperation against piracy and other maritime threats.

THERE WAS AN INCREASE IN INCIDENTS IN 2017, AS COMPARED TO 2016. WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE REASONS BEHIND THIS?

We saw an increase in incidents to 101 (89 actual and 12 attempted incidents) last year, compared to 85 incidents in 2016.

The almost 19 per cent rise is largely attributed to an increase of incidents in Bangladesh (11 incidents) and the Philippines (17 incidents), mainly at ports and anchorages. There was also an increase of incidents in the South China Sea (12 incidents) as well as in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore (nine incidents).

Possible reasons for the increase are lower surveillance by the littoral states and port authorities, and the lack of vigilance among ship crew.

IS THERE A NEED FOR THE MARITIME COMMUNITY TO BE TROUBLED BY THIS TREND AND ITS CONTRIBUTING CAUSES?

In terms of the level of severity of the incidents, there was a decrease in the number of the most severe incidents (Category 1) in 2017, compared to 2016 – there were six Category 1 incidents in 2017, a more than 50 per cent drop from 2016's 13 incidents.

Declines were also seen in the number of incidents occurring at ports and anchorages in India, Malaysia, and Vietnam, as well as in the number of incidents of abduction of crew in the Sulu-Celebes Seas – there were three incidents in 2017, compared to 10 in 2016.

So actually, the situation has improved overall. However, there is no room for complacency. There is a need for maritime enforcement authorities to exercise enhanced vigilance, and strengthen their capacity to deal with the threats of piracy and sea robbery.

Cooperation and coordination among governmental agencies – including intelligence sharing between the police and maritime enforcement agencies – are crucial in order to apprehend and prosecute the perpetrators.

ARE CYBER ATTACKS A GROWING AREA OF CONCERN?

For sure, this is an emerging area of concern. At this point in time though, cyber attacks are usually not directly linked to piracy cases. They are, nonetheless, a threat to the maritime

community at large, and there is a need to take relevant precautions against them.

ReCAAP's member countries range from more advanced countries whose shipping companies are well on the path to digitalisation to less developed economies whose companies are less dependent on technology. Therefore, the impact of the cyber-security problem varies between countries and shipping companies.

The fact is that we do not see a lot of reported cases, probably due to under-reporting. Nonetheless, we acknowledge the importance of the problem, and occasionally invite experts in the field to share their knowledge with member countries and raise awareness on the possible and potential threats against the shipping industry.

WHAT ROLES DO GOVERNMENTS AND SHIPPING ASSOCIATIONS PLAY IN JOINT EFFORTS TO COMBAT PIRACY AND CREW ABDUCTIONS?

Ships/shipping companies are strongly requested to report the incidents immediately to the nearest coastal states so that enforcement agencies can deploy their ships efficiently.

Enforcement agencies have to ensure quick responses whenever an incident is reported. Otherwise, victim ships will end up not reporting incidents to the authorities due to a lack of confidence that any action will be taken against the perpetrators.

This is why there is a strong emphasis on capacity building within and among governmental agencies, such as coast guards, marine police, and port authorities.

Our capacity-building activities, which are conducted two to three times a year, are attended by officers from ReCAAP's member countries. At these meetings, participants share their experiences and challenges so as to enhance enforcement capabilities.

The improved situation in Vietnam, for example, can be attributed in part to the closer monitoring and surveillance being carried out. With improved information sharing and coordination among governmental agencies, the Vietnamese authorities arrested a number of perpetrators in 2016. They have also created employment opportunities for fishermen in the Vung Tau area so that they are not lured into illegal or illicit activities.



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HOW DID RECAAP COME ABOUT AND HOW IS IT RUN?

ReCAAP is the first regional government-to-government body established with the aim of enhancing cooperation among its member countries in combating piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia.

The organisation came about after a spike in such incidents in Asia in the late 1990s and early 2000s – the numbers jumped from 118 cases in 1998 to 357 in 2000. This led to the Straits of Malacca being declared a “war zone” by marine insurers in 2005 and 2006. In practical terms, the rising number of incidents also resulted in rising insurance premiums, economic disruptions and risks to seafarers, as well as a loss of not only goods but also vessels.

Recognising the need for coordinated and multilateral action to address this growing threat, Asian countries came together to negotiate terms of agreement and cooperation, which were finalised in November 2004. The result was the launch of the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ISC) in Singapore on Nov 29, 2006.

ReCAAP’s 10 founding members included seven South-east Asian nations, India, Japan, and Korea; it has since expanded to 20 members, with the inclusion of European countries such as Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, as well as Australia and the United States. Funding is on a voluntary basis, with Singapore, the host country of ReCAAP ISC, contributing around 65 per cent of the annual budget.

The organisation is currently staffed by 16 individuals – nine Singaporeans and six seconders from its member countries and the Executive Director appointed by the Governing Council.

WHAT EXACTLY DOES RECAAP DO TO HELP MAINTAIN REGIONAL MARITIME SAFETY?

The primary roles of the ReCAAP ISC are threefold. First, it facilitates the sharing of timely and accurate information on incidents of piracy and sea robbery. Second, it supports, and works to enhance, member states’ capacity-building efforts, especially with regard to incidents reporting and law enforcement capabilities. Third, it facilitates cooperative arrangements among its members, as well as with international organisations such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO), INTERPOL, and the international and regional shipping associations.

At the ISC in Singapore, we collect, collate, analyse, and disseminate information in several ways – through ad hoc warnings, alerts and updates, as well as via weekly, monthly, quarterly, biannual, annual and special reports. We have also produced guides for the shipping industry, such as a guide for tugboats and barges, a guide for tankers and a Regional Guide for Asia, on the various measures they can take to deter pirates and robbers.

The dissemination of information is crucial in order to ensure that all parties have a clear overview of the current situation. This awareness means that they can make informed decisions, undertake collective efforts, and share responsibilities, and hence, be able to develop more effective responses to incidences of theft, robbery, and abduction in the region. ReCAAP covers a wide area, stretching from North to South-east Asia, from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean.

The ReCAAP ISC’s next goal is to be a Centre of Excellence (COE) as a subject matter expert, and a go-to centre for information on all matters related to piracy and sea robbery in Asia. We have already seen our regional cooperation used as a model for the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) – the regional arrangement to combat piracy in waters of East Africa.

We have also played a key role in supporting the development of three Regional ISCs in Kenya, Tanzania, and Yemen under the DCoC.