CRUISING FOR BRUISING? :
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE PERCEIVED SECURITY THREAT AGAINST
PASSENGER VESSELS ALONG THE STRAITS OF MALACCA

by
Nazery Khalid
Research Fellow, Maritime Institute of Malaysia
6th Floor, Megan Avenue II, 12 Jalan Yap Kwan Seng,
50450 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Tel: 603-21612960 / Fax: 03-21617045
www.mima.gov.my / nazery@mima.gov.my

Abstract

Despite the absence of officially recorded incidents of piracy and terrorist attack on
crew ships and pleasure crafts sailing through the Straits of Malacca thus far, the world
continues to have the impression that this prime passage is unsafe for such vessels. This
paper attempts to provide an objective appraisal on the perceived security threat against
passenger vessels along the Straits. It draws attention to the statistics of piracy attacks
compiled by International Maritime Bureau (IMB) and efforts undertaken by littoral
states to maintain security in the Straits. It hopes to put into perspective the perception of
many that the Straits of Malacca is vulnerable for passenger cruise ships.

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comments and to Amir Dastan for enduring yet another editing request. The views expressed herein are
entirely the author’s own and do not reflect those of Maritime Institute of Malaysia.
“I cannot be too far out now ... 
I hope no one has been too worried”

(‘Old Man and the Sea’ by Ernest Hemingway)

Peril at sea: Clear and present danger

The old man, Santiago, the protagonist in Ernest Hemingway’s classic maritime tome, went far out to sea alone. Drifting in his small skiff, it set the stage for a titanic, bloody battle between man and shark.

Now transport your mind from the Gulf Stream waters where Hemingway’s story was set to modern-day Straits of Malacca, one of the world’s busiest and most strategic waterways. Instead of an old man in a beat-up boat, picture an ultra-modern passenger cruise sailing out in the Straits away from the main shipping lanes, out of the sight of Navy patrols and the coverage of navigational management systems. All alone at sea, like Santiago’s dinghy, it is then attacked and hijacked by terrorists. Man versus a menace of a different kind but no less dangerous than the shark that pounced on Santiago’s dinghy.

When I started working on this paper, such a potentially nightmarish scenario would be more commonly found in novels and movies than in real life. Tom Clancy’s thriller, “The Sum of All Fears” and the movie ‘Speed 2: Cruise Control’ came to mind. They feature stories based on the kind of premise that has sent post 9-11 doomsayers working overtime predicting that an attack on passenger cruise was no longer a question of ‘if’ but ‘when’. Prior to last year, the last headline-grabbing attacks on cruise ships seemed a distant past, but to the horror of the cruising community, the ‘when’ prediction materialized. The attack on the Seabourn Spirit off the coast of Somalia in November 2005 has heightened the focus on passenger cruise safety once again.

The 9-11 attacks have spurred the maritime sector to reassess its vulnerabilities against potential acts of hostility and sabotage. The aftershocks of death and destruction caused by those attacks have spurred the sector to focus on mitigating the security risks in its operations, systems and procedures. Nowhere is the issue of maritime security given sharper focus than in the strategic, high-risk waters of Straits of Malacca.²

Several experts, including the armchair type, have warned against 9-11 type of attacks being replicated at sea. They are convinced that commercial ships and passenger cruises are vulnerable to piracy and terrorist threats. But is such a dire prediction sensible or just scaremongering? Is it warranted, in lieu of persistent piratical attacks at sea and the Seabourn Spirit incident, or a reflection of a world gone super-touchy after the 9-11 attacks?

² The Piracy Reporting Center of the International Maritime Bureau, the agency providing support to nations engaged in counter-piracy initiatives by maintaining a database of piracy incidents, has described the Straits of Malacca as “the most dangerous passage in the world”. This is of course open to debate.
Much efforts and resources have been spent since 9-11 into making navigation in the Straits of Malacca safer and to blunt security threats to ships passing through. Although they enjoy varying degrees of effectiveness, the zero attack on passenger cruise recorded in the sealane so far vindicates the slew of initiatives undertaken to secure the Straits. It is within this context that this paper attempts to provide an objective assessment of the safety of navigation of passenger vessels in this crucial waterway.

**Maritime security scenario post 9-11**

The discourse of contemporary security framework has taken a wider scope since 9-11. The impacts of the attacks have shifted the term “security” into a more complex dimension.\(^3\) Despite the aerial nature of the attacks, there are concerns that other transport modes can be subjected to such atrocities. Post 9-11, the maritime industry has found itself in the spotlight of great concern as authorities initiate moves to shore up defenses against the menace of terrorist onslaught.

Much of this focus has been trained on maritime trade and cargo ships deemed to be vulnerable to terrorism.\(^4\) But equally worrying is the potential of such attacks being inflicted on cruise or passenger ships. All the same, attacks on ocean-going vessels can result in huge financial losses, casualties and environmental damage. Not to mention crippling maritime trade waterways and delivering a severe psychological blow to a world already edgy after the 9-11 attacks.

The fact remains that very few terrorist attacks on sea-going vessels in recent memories have involved cruise ships. Prior to November 2005, attacks on such vessels involved the *Achille Lauro* in 1985 and the *City of Poros* in 1989.\(^5\) The attack on *Seabourn Spirit* last year and post 9-11 security realities have evoked fresh fears of the vulnerability of cruise ships. If planes could be hijacked and used as weapons of lethal destruction, who’s willing to wager a bet against terrorists replicating such daring acts on passenger ships on the high seas?

The custodians of the Straits of Malacca, a waterway notorious for frequent piracy incidences, especially face immense challenge to neutralize the potential threats of terror along it. Of the major concerns in the Straits, ensuring the safe passage for vessels traversing is the most pivotal. Already saddled with the threat of piracy, long been a bane

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\(^4\) Among the elements contributing to the vulnerability of maritime trade and cargo ships are the sheer volume of cargos involved, the focus on speed and efficiency, and the international nature of maritime trade and cargo ships movement. See Shah, S.B. (2004), ‘Securing maritime trade : Post-September 11 security initiatives and their implications on Malaysia’, MIMA Issue Paper, Kuala Lumpur, p. 1.

along the waterway, the scourge of terrorism has added an extra burden to the littoral states in maintaining security in the waterway. The tendency of some quarters to link piracy and terrorism when no clear and credible nexus exists has not at all been helpful in allaying fears over safety in the Straits.

The cruise boom in the Straits of Malacca

The cruise ship industry is one of the fastest growing and most visible sectors of the tourism and travel industry. Since it began in the 1960s, the modern cruising industry has evolved from its initial image of an elitist pursuit to emerge rapidly as a popular vacation means for the masses. The number of passengers on cruise ships has grown twice as fast as global tourist arrivals over the last decade, and is expected to grow at 8.5% annually over the next decade (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of passengers worldwide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>9,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>14,200,000*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Estimate


2004 was the best year in the history of the cruise industry which recorded the highest passenger volume ever of 10.6 million, and achieved an all-time high occupancy level at 105%. The value for money cruise offered, the widespread increase of cruise ports and facilities, and the variety of attractions available onboard of cruise ships contributed to such phenomenal numbers. The popularity of cruising was poised to grow with the industry projected to carry 11 million passengers in 2005.

Although the region in which the Straits of Malacca lies is nowhere near the stature of the Caribbean as the world’s leading cruise region, the growth of cruise activities in the area has gone from strength to strength. Cruise calls have increased in Asia Pacific destinations, highlighting the growing importance of the region as a popular cruise destination and market. The cruising industry in the region has overcome the impacts of

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9 ‘Cruise market to reach 11m people this year’, Lloyd’s Cruise International, April/May 2005, p. 5.
the slump caused by events such as 9-11, SARS and the recent tsunami disaster on cruising activities in the area. Relentless campaigns urging tourists to return to the region to boost economies adversely affected by those setbacks have borne fruit, if cruise passenger traffic growth is any indication. Passenger-nights committed to Asia Pacific for 2005-2006 have increased more than 40%, indicating good times ahead for the region’s cruise industry.

With the growth of marine tourism in Straits of Malacca, the sealane is fast gaining popularity as a new cruising playground. It commands a central location in an area which is being promoted as a borderless regional cruising playground consisting of the wide arc of water from Yangon in Myanmar to Manila Bay in the Philippines. The governments and key cruising operators of the countries participating in this idea are going all out to promote confidence in the region and to enhance the growth of marine tourism in a coordinated manner.

The Asia Pacific region's growing appetite for leisure cruise has grown in tandem with its maritime infrastructure. Singapore has announced plans to build a US$1 billion cruise center featuring hotel, convention center and casino facilities, while other Asian ports such as Shanghai, Hong Kong and Goa are reported to be building new cruise facilities. Some are adapting existing facilities to be able to accommodate larger cruise ships or servicing niche market ships. These exemplify the bullish outlook for a positive future for the cruise industry in the region.

There are few, if at all, surveys of cruise activities undertaken in the Straits of Malacca region. However, past evidence suggests that a significant proportion of these passenger numbers travel on cruises to nowhere of less than two nights’ duration. The region’s capacity is dominated by deluxe or 4-star vessels targeted mainly at the mainstream cruise market characterized by large and mega-size ships and smaller ones catering to the premium segment. Together, these account for half of static capacity in the region.

With the boom in Asia Pacific cruising, more cruise ships have been traversing the Straits of Malacca which links South East Asia and the Pacific region. More lines are poised to increase their capacity in the Straits, thanks to relentless efforts to promote cruising in the region. The Malaysian government is pursuing efforts to develop its

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10 Orams, M. (1999) defined marine tourism to include ‘recreational activities that involve travel away from one’s place of residence and which have as their host or focus the marine environment’. Traveling on ocean liners or passenger cruise ships certainly falls into the sea-related activities as categorized by him.
11 This idea gained momentum with the holding of a symposium titled ‘From Yangon to Manila Bay: A New Cruising Playground’ held in Kuala Lumpur on 26-27 May, 2005.
15 Lloyd’s Cruise International defines Asia Pacific cruising as comprising of cruises taking place within the Pacific Ocean and including those operating within and between the countries of South East Asia, primarily Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia.
marine tourism industry to focus on cruise, yachting and sailing. Star Cruises, the Malaysian based-cruiser, has announced plans to double its presence in Singapore, underlining the cruise industry’s growth in the Far East. Malaysia and Singapore are positioning themselves to exploit the waters of Straits of Malacca to attract cruise liners. These bode well for more cruise tonnage coming into the region in the future.

**Dire straits, or worry for nothing?**

The Straits of Malacca is one of the world’s busiest and most important shipping lanes. It is a vital artery linking the region’s economy with the rest of the world. Located right smack in one of the world’s most vibrant economic growth areas, the Straits is a pivotal link in international trade and transportation. Carrying a third of world trade and half of its oil supplies, security in the Straits is a matter of grave concern to the stakeholders.

It is estimated that around 4.5% of over 63,000 ships traversing the Straits of Malacca, consists of passenger ships. This crucial passage, along the path of a popular marine tourism area in the region, is deemed - rightly or wrongly - a high-risk area due to its ‘image’ of being a piracy-prone waterway and the perceived threat of terrorism therein. The evaluation by Lloyd’s Market Association’s Joint War Committee (LMAJWC) in July 2005 categorizing the Straits as an area in jeopardy of “war, strikes, terrorism and related perils”, based merely on a consultant’s hyped-up report, has further given this strategic waterway bad press. Although the categorization has resulted in fierce backlash by the littoral states and the international shipping community, LMAJWC is adamant not to review its list until it is fully satisfied that ample measures have been undertaken to maintain security in the waterway.

Worries over the safety of passenger vessels navigating the Straits of Malacca are not unfounded. The intense concentration in cargo traffic in the waterway has spawned a complex web of hub and feeder shipping networks within the region and with the rest of the world, providing rich pickings to those with ill-intent. Add to the fact that the waters are a hotbed for piracy cases and the narrow passage of the Straits, security concerns in the sealane seem warranted. Constant media coverage of publicity-seeking pseudo-analysts opining that terrorist attacks in the Straits are imminent helps fan the flames of fear further.

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18 Malaysia’s Marine Department figure for 2004.
It is crucial at this juncture to separate piracy\(^{19}\) from terrorism\(^{20}\). From literature review of the two phenomena, it can be surmised that pirates commit their deeds for monetary and commercial reasons, while terrorists are just out to score political points and make ideological statements and are not interested in commercial gains. Although there are perceived links between piracy and terrorism especially after 9/11, they are distinctly separate from one another as defined by international law. Thus far, a definitive link between the two has yet to be established, although security analysts have warned of the possibility of terrorists ‘subcontracting’ their dirty deeds to pirates. But since this anxiety is based on mere opinions inclined towards worst-case scenarios, the discussion on the possible threat to passenger cruise in the Straits of Malacca will be focused on piracy, which can be substantiated by official statistics, rather than terrorism, which has yet to occur on cruise ships in the region up to the point of completing this paper.

One of the rising trends identified by security and piracy analysts is a clear rise in kidnap for ransom cases that has emerged in the Straits of Malacca over recent years. According to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), hijackings of cargo-carrying vessels and the kidnapping of their crew members continued to increase in the northern region of the Straits and off the North Sumatran coast. There were increasing indications that crime syndicates were launching these attacks from fishing boats.\(^{21}\) Some of the incidents occurring in Straits of Malacca reported by IMB involved crew of ships being fired upon and kidnapped for ransom.\(^{22}\)

Since 2003, pirate attacks have tapered off worldwide (see Table 2). But despite the decline, IMB has issued caution to commercial ships to remain cautious in hotspot areas including the Straits of Malacca water column. The Straits suffered 10 attacks between January to September 2005 compared to 25 in the previous year’s corresponding period.\(^{23}\) Although there were less attacks, fears have mounted on the escalating scale of the violence involved in the incidents and the increasingly brazen nature of the attacks.

\(^{19}\) Article 101 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982 defines ‘piracy’ as consisting of any of the following acts: (a) any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship or a private aircraft, and directed: (i) on the high seas, against another ship or aircraft, or against persons or property on board such ship or aircraft; (ii) against a ship, aircraft, persons or property in a place outside the jurisdiction of any State; (b) any act of voluntary participation in the operation of a ship or of an aircraft with knowledge of facts making it a pirate ship or aircraft; (c) any act of inciting or of intentionally facilitating an act described in subparagraph (a) or (b).

\(^{20}\) Defining ‘terrorism’ is a task that is evoking very strong emotions in international relations. The term carries different meaning to different people. The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) defines it to mean “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience”. The United Nations’ General Assembly is currently considering a draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism which would include a definition of terrorism, if adopted.


\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) IMB attributed the reduction in the number of attacks on the increased patrols in the Straits of Malacca by the navies of the littoral states.
Table 2: Piracy attacks worldwide, 2001-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Incidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005*</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Jan-Sep

Source: International Maritime Bureau

The marked reduction in pirate attacks in the Straits from 2004 into early 2005 was believed to be a result of the aftermath of the tsunami in January 2005. It was suggested that pirates were severely hit physically by the disaster and their activities were curtailed by the heavy presence of vessels in the Straits involved in relief efforts. The fact that most pirates in the Straits are believed to originate from the northern region of Sumatra which bore the brunt of the tsunami lent currency to this assertion. But from March 2005 onwards, there was a resurgence of violent incidents involving kidnappings for ransom.

Remarkably, cruise and passenger ships have been spared of these attacks which have mainly involved tankers, tugs and barges. But despite zero recorded incident of piracy or terrorist attack on cruise ships and pleasure crafts sailing through this prime passage thus far, the world continues to have the impression that the Straits of Malacca is unsafe for such vessels. This begs the question, if the Straits is such a high-risk zone, why haven’t cruise ships avoided the waterway and why is passenger cruise so popular in the region?

Although the Straits of Malacca should not in any way be compared to the Somalian waters where the attack on Seabourn Spirit occurred, perhaps some lessons could be drawn from the incident in explaining the absence of attacks on cruise ships in the Straits. As demonstrated by the incident, a pirate attack on a cruise liner is difficult to pull off as it is difficult for pirates, normally operating in small vessels, to gain access on cruise ships in the Straits. Perhaps they are put off by the onboard anti-terror technology and security features on cruise ships, such as the ‘sonar gun’ or long-range acoustic device reportedly used by Seabourn Spirit to deter its attackers. Or they are now more aware of the ability of cruise ships to change course and evade pirates in small vessels easily, a la

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25 Gavin Simmonds, a defense advisor at the Chamber of British Shipping, said that given the size of a cruise ship like the Seabourn Spirit which has four guest decks and three elevators, there was no conceivable way for pirates to have gone onboard unless the crew “had thrown a rope down to them”. Queen Mary 2, the world’s largest and longest cruise ship owned by Cunard Line and built by Alstom, has a height of a 23-storey building. That’s going to require some rope to mount.
Over and above realizing their limitations, as severely exposed by Seabourn Spirit, the attackers perhaps realize that an assault on cruise ship will bring all hell down upon them by the authorities, which would not at all be in their interest. Opinions are divided on whether the Seabourn Spirit incident was piratical or terrorism in nature, but experts believe that any attack on passenger cruise would result in severe repercussions on the perpetrators.

Efforts to enhance security in the Straits of Malacca

In the wake of the 9-11 attacks, the littoral States of the Straits of Malacca, namely Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, have undertaken various initiatives aimed at curbing the menace of piracy and securing the waterway from the threats of terror. The major ones are:

- The implementation of MALSINDO, a coordinated patrol scheme involving the navies of the littoral states.
- The formation of Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, a Coast Guard-type outfit providing sea-going maritime constabulary services. It will look after the safety of vessels transiting Malaysian waters and is expected to improve policing of the Straits of Malacca.
- The launching of “Eyes in the Sky”, a multinational maritime air-patrol initiative over the Straits of Malacca, to achieve maritime domain awareness and to deal with piracy and transnational criminal activities in the area.
- The increase in the capacity and scope of several security systems in place involving sea surveillance, vessel traffic and ship reporting.
- The increase in initiatives at the bilateral level, such as Indonesia and Singapore’s effort to launch a surveillance radar system in a bid to boost waterways security in the Singapore Straits linking the Straits of Malacca to the South China Sea.

These measures complement existing ones such as the introduction of Maritime Electronic Highway coordinated by International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the creation of inshore traffic route for pleasure crafts to ensure that they do not entangle with other traffic. In addition, several regional initiatives have been established in the South East Asian region to boost security. These include agreement on information

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exchange and establishment of communication procedures, treaty of mutual assistance in criminal matters and regional forum framework on measures against terrorism, counter-terrorism and transnational crime. An agency named South East Asian Regional Center for Counter-Terrorism has been set up, while agreements have been reached between ASEAN members and its dialogue partners such as the US and EU with reference to cooperation against terrorism and in the field of security.

The various security initiatives have gone a long way towards calming nerves rattled by the spate of piracy attacks in the Straits of Malacca. One cannot fault the littoral states for lack of action, despite the barrage of criticism towards their perceived lackadaisical attitude in ensuring safety of passage. The strong reaction by the littoral states against the categorization of the Straits as a war-risk zone by Lloyd’s Joint War Committee last year should therefore not come as a surprise. Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia in a joint communiqué described the categorization as a rash action taken without taking into cognizance their relentless efforts to patrol the Straits.

It was argued that some of the initiatives taken have made no obvious impact on the number of piracy incidents in the Straits of Malacca. But while it is not realistic to expect zero-piracy in the huge area of the Straits, it would not be far-fetched to attribute the recent drastic drop in piracy attacks in the waters to the intensified efforts undertaken by the littoral states. It is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of some initiatives like the coordinated patrols and “Eyes in the Sky” program, but it is fair to expect security in the area to improve tremendously once all the initiatives are running full steam.

**Is the Straits of Malacca safe for passenger cruise? : A critical analysis**

On account of the panic button being frequently pressed in the media about the potential attacks on passenger vessels in the Straits of Malacca, it would appear that such an incident is a foregone conclusion. If the so-called expert analysis is to be believed, the Straits is a security time-bomb at the point of combustion. Yet the fact remains that not even a single attack on cruise ship has occurred in the Straits so far. This should at least allow for an objective discussion on the topic to address the perception of the Straits being unsafe for such vessels.

Are passenger cruises prime target for pirates and terrorists in the Straits? Possibly. No such attack has occurred so far, but to eliminate the possibility entirely would be dismissive of the perils of the waterway. Although piracy attacks on merchant ships do occur in the Straits, giving it an image of a treacherous sealane of frequent piratical activities, it should be noted that the number of pirate attacks represented a mere 0.01% of the total traffic volume. From a statistical standpoint alone, it must be conceded that the probability of a piratical attack on a cruise ship or any type of ship for that matter in

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Terrorism in South-East Asia and Its Implications for South Asia, Observer Research Foundation, 28-29 April 2004.

30 On the basis of 37 attacks in the Straits in 2004 as reported by IMB against 63,636 ships traversing the Straits in the same year as reported by the Malaysian Marine Department.
the Straits is remote. Even more so when one takes into account that incidents of pirate attacks in the Straits are at their lowest in a long time.\(^{31}\)

The cruise industry has faced a whole new spectrum of security challenges after 9-11. The industry’s response has been swift, showing an admirable nimbleness in adapting to newly emerging concerns and realities of sea travel. Changes in fleet deployment, exciting cruise features, and aggressive marketing and branding have helped the industry capitalize on travelers’ reluctance to fly after 9-11.\(^{32}\)

The features of new generation cruise ships also play a significant role in mitigating security risks. Vessels are strictly governed by international rule such as Safety of Life at Seas (SOLAS), flag state rules and classification registry rules.\(^{33}\) Post 9-11, many cruise operators have embraced the philosophy that the best onboard safety system is their crew. Many have been well-trained to deal with safety and security situations onboard and at sea. The initiative of the cruise operators to beef up security also goes a long way to help boost confidence in the industry. They meet frequently with different intelligence agencies to review their security plans and map out new cruise itineraries, while constantly heeding IMB’s sea warnings.\(^{34}\)

The manner in which the crew of *Seabourn Spirit* successfully repelled her attackers reflects this approach and vindicates the slew of efforts made to ensure vessel safety post 9-11. The liner escaped her pursuers by a combination of using non-lethal weapon and shifting to high speed and changing course.\(^{35}\) Such features and safety measures complement the efforts by International Maritime Oragnization (IMO) which is spearheading an exercise to enhance safety of passenger ships. This exercise entails two basic principles: ships should be designed so that passengers can remain on board in emergency events, and ships too badly damaged to sail to port should be able to survive for at least three hours to facilitate safe, orderly evacuation.\(^{36}\) These targets are aimed at preventing casualty and improving the survivability of passenger ships, taking into consideration the trend of commissioning larger ships and to ply remote locations. They should add comfort in the event of a piratical or terrorist attack that may cause structural damages to cruise ships.

**Cruising the Straits of Malacca - minus the bruising**

The combination of the 9-11 attacks, the subway attack in London, and the threats of piracy and terror on the high seas has had an understandable effect of making people

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\(^{31}\) IMB reported only 10 piratical attacks in the Straits of Malacca in the third quarter of 2005, a sharp drop from 25 in the same period in 2004. See ‘Pirate attacks in Malacca Strait at six-year low’, The Straits Times, 9 November 2005.


\(^{34}\) ‘Danger adrift: Modern-day pirates threaten more than the high seas’, ABC News online, [www.abcnnews.go.com](http://www.abcnnews.go.com) (accessed on 15/11/2005).

\(^{35}\) ‘Pirates beaten off with sonic weapon’, The Star, 9 November 2005.

edgy to travel. The cruise industry has not been spared of the fear that a nautical version of 9-11 or modern-day ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ type of buccaneers might strike.

But one good thing coming out of 9-11 and the Seabourn Spirit incident is an increasingly widespread appreciation that terrorist and piracy threats know no boundary. Virtually every nation and industry now realizes that such threats must be fought off resolutely, sometimes ruthlessly. It is comforting to note that the cruise industry is also appreciative of this reality and has taken many efforts to mitigate the risks of such threats. Operators, governments, enforcement agencies and maritime organizations have also pulled their individual and collective weights to improve maritime security.

At the state level, many steps have been taken to rid of the scourge of terror and piracy. These involve counter-terrorism laws, frequent patrolling, tighter border controls and aggressive sanctioning of activities that may lead to such activities. All these, taken unilaterally or in cooperation with other states, are laudable steps forward in fighting terrorist threats. The cruise industry and maritime community have no doubt benefited tremendously from the many initiatives, on top of their own efforts to step up security. The success of Seabourn Spirit to repel its attackers and deliver its passengers to a safe port is testimony to the effectiveness of the cruise industry’s security plans and countermeasures. There is no reason not to believe that such effectiveness would not apply to other waters traversed by cruise ships such as the Straits of Malacca, a less dangerous and much better monitored area compared to the Somalian waters where the Seabourn Spirit incident occurred.

Statistics can vouch for the safety record of cruising. The attack on Seabourn Spirit has to be put in perspective so as not to paint a distorted picture of the remarkable safety of the industry. It was the first recorded one in 16 years since the City of Porus hijacking incident in 1989. Including the attack on Achille Lauro in 1985, that is a mere total of three incidents in 20 years involving passenger ships, out of the many voyages that have taken place since. Granted, piracy occurs in the Straits of Malacca, but it must be re-emphasized that there has not been any recorded attacks on cruise ships in the waterway to this date.

From all accounts, cruise lines are “ahead of the game” in its recognition of the value of safety and incorporating it into its business practice. The track record of cruising suggests it to be one of the safest forms of vacations. The industry has steadfastly taken substantial and sustained efforts to be vigilant against piracy and terrorist attacks. In addition, initiatives by government agencies and maritime organizations have improved maritime security in general and in the Straits of Malacca in particular. Barring a drastic deterioration in global maritime security, this looks set to remain so in waters traversed by cruise ships around the world including in the Straits.

Admittedly, this assertion will be swiftly sunk by a single attack on a cruise ship in the Straits of Malacca. But just as we haven’t stopped flying despite the occasional incidences involving airplanes, we shouldn’t allow the perception of cruising in the Straits as risky to hold sway based on three incidents over two decades taking place in areas not even remotely near it. That said, everyone involved in the industry must keep up vigilance to ensure safety and security of passage in the Straits.

The responsibility of ensuring the security of passenger and cruise ships in the Straits of Malacca should not be confined to the custodians of the waterway and cruise operators only. A systemic view should be taken to ensure that the safety of such vessels is ensured from the point of departure to the point of arrival. There must be coordination amongst the entities in the entire maritime chain – cruise companies, passengers, ports, insurers, insurers, security enforcement and intelligence agencies, among others – to create a security-conscious culture in the cruise industry. Given the reality of post 9-11 maritime security matrix and the emerging unconventional threats of terrorism, it is crucial that such a culture be nurtured and emphasized by the cruise industry. A safety culture that focuses on security management systems and practices, and a proactive, anticipative approach towards security can complement the work of enforcement and intelligence agencies and buttress the security shield they provide.

In the final analysis, it is important that a comprehensive and multidimensional approach is taken to combat the scourge of terrorism and the complexity of the issue of piracy, to address their root causes and to put in place preemptive measures to ensure safety of cruise ships in the Straits of Malacca. The transnational, fluid nature of terrorism and piracy demands a comprehensive and sustained multinational effort in countering their threats. This is especially so in a strategically sensitive waterway like the Straits that can easily be tainted by bad PR and distorted perception.

A sense of perspective should be exercised to frame the discourse of safety in the Straits of Malacca in a realistic context. Passenger cruise, by nature of their operations, features and load, can be inviting to pirates and terrorists in the way Santiago’s prized marlin attracted sharks. But just as the old man didn’t give up the notion of going to sea again despite his adversity, a few isolated attacks on passenger vessels elsewhere should not taint the perception of the Straits’ unblemished safety record for cruise ships.

MARITIME INSTITUTE OF MALAYSIA
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