

PIRACY AND ARMED ROBBERY IN ASIAN WATERS: IS VIGILANCE STILL ESSENTIAL?

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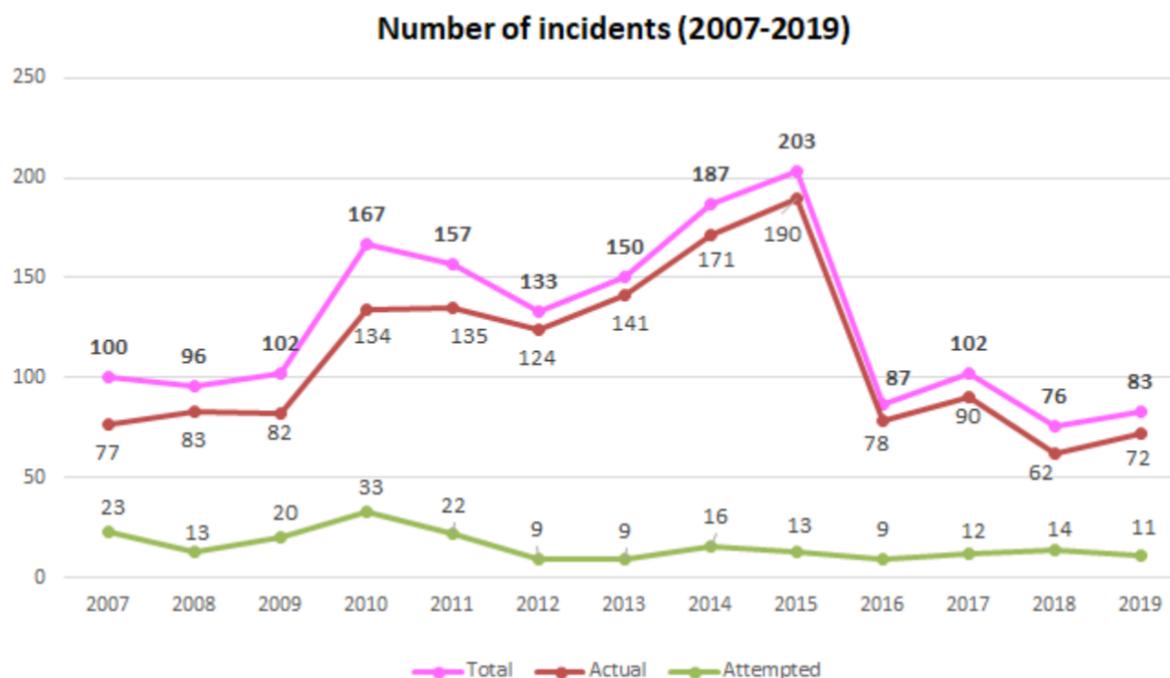
INTRODUCTION

Recent media reports have highlighted a reported increase in piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asian waters during 2019. But is the threat of piracy and armed robbery in Asia actually getting worse? Or were the media reports unduly alarmist? This Risk Bulletin is focused on providing an update of MM Risk Bulletin No. 8 and an objective assessment of the current piracy security situation.

NOTE: The difference between ‘piracy’ and ‘armed robbery against ships’ is no more than a legal distinction. It depends upon precisely where the relevant criminal act took place. If it occurred in ‘international waters’ (i.e. outside of the 12 nautical mile limit of the territorial waters of a coastal state), it will be classified as ‘piracy’. If inside territorial waters or internal waters, then the act will be classified as ‘armed robbery’.

BACKGROUND

The aforementioned media reports were based on [ReCAAP’s Situation Update 2019](#) which is an annual publication. A [ReCAAP press release](#) was also issued at the same time. The ReCAAP information sources advised that a total of 83 piracy/armed robbery incidents (72 actual incidents and 11 unsuccessful incidents) had occurred in Asian Waters in 2019. The total of 83 incidents in 2019 was 7 more than in 2018 (a 9% increase). To put this comparative data into context, it was also the 2nd lowest total incident number (which occurred in 2018) since ReCAAP records began in 2007. This information is illustrated by a graph extracted from a [ReCAAP PowerPoint](#) as below:



It can be seen that the incident trend is downwards from the all-time high of 203 Asian Waters incidents recorded in 2015. But will this downward trend continue?

INCIDENT LOCATIONS IN 2019

The 83 incidents in 2019 occurred in the following locations:

- Malacca Straits and Singapore Straits (31)
- Indonesia (23)
- Malaysia (8)
- Philippines (7)
- India (5)
- China (3)
- Sulu-Celebes Seas (2)
- Vietnam (2)
- South China Sea (1)
- Pacific Ocean (1)

Based on incident numbers alone, it can be seen that the two highest risk areas appear to be the Malacca/Singapore Straits and Indonesia. However, the ReCAAP risk categories must also be considered.

UNDERSTANDING THE RECAAP RISK CATEGORIES

To usefully apply the incident data provided by ReCAAP, it is necessary to understand the different Categories of incident risk that are referred to in their reports. The ReCAAP Categories are graded from 1 to 4 as described by ReCAAP below. Cat 1 is the most violent and dangerous. Cat 4 is the least dangerous.

Category	Description
CAT 1	CAT 1 incidents involved large number of perpetrators; more than 9 men in four out every 10 incidents and 4-9 men in the other six incidents. The perpetrators were mostly armed with guns and knives, and the crew is likely to suffer some form of injury or physical violence such as being assaulted or tied up or threatened. In term of losses, the ship was either hijacked or the cargo on board was stolen, for example siphoning of cargo oil.
CAT 2	Majority of CAT 2 incidents involved 4-9 men who are likely to be armed with knives/machetes and in 1/4 of the incidents, armed with guns. The crew is likely to be threatened or held hostage temporarily to allow the perpetrators to steal the crew's cash and ship's property including engine spares. In a few cases, the crew suffered some form of injury or physical violence but less severe in nature

	compared to CAT 1 incidents.
CAT 3	The number of perpetrators involved in CAT 3 incidents usually involved groups of between 1-6 men. At times, the perpetrators were armed with knives/machetes/others or other items such as sticks, rods, bats etc. The crew was not harmed, although there were cases of crew subject to duress during the incident but not harmed physically. In almost half of the CAT 3 incidents, the perpetrators were unable to steal anything from the vessel, but in cases where losses were reported, stores and engine spares were the commonly targeted items.
CAT 4	The perpetrators were not armed and the crew not harmed. More than half of CAT 4 incidents involved 1-3 men who escaped empty-handed upon sighted by the crew.

SEVERITY OF 2019 INCIDENTS

In terms of the number and severity of the 72 actual piracy/armed robbery incidents which occurred in Asian Waters in 2019, ReCAAP reports there were:

- CAT 1 x 2 incidents (crew abductions in Sulu Sea)
- CAT 2 x 6 incidents
- CAT 3 x 14 incidents
- CAT 4 x 50 incidents (69% majority of all incidents – perpetrators not armed, crew not harmed.)

This data provides incident context and perspective. However, it does not permit complacency as every incursion by hostile outsiders into a vessel constitutes a serious ISPS Code security breach.

RECAAP ‘AREAS OF CONCERN’

ReCAAP have stated their concerns as to the high risk of piracy/armed robbery in the Asian Waters areas listed below:

SULU-CELEBES SEA AND EASTERN SABAH REGION:

Only two incidents of abduction of crew for ransom were reported in these waters during 2019. However, a total of 19 actual and 11 attempted incidents of abduction of crew in this region have been reported in the three years since March 2016. As such, ReCAAP consider that the CAT 1 abduction of crew for ransom remains a serious threat in this area.

BANDAR PENAWAR, JOHOR, MALAYSIA:

Five incidents were reported in 2019 onboard vessels anchored outside of the anchorage areas designated by the Malaysia and Singapore authorities. There were no reported incidents in this area in 2018. This is a concerning development. Vessels should anchor inside the designated areas to improve security surveillance.

SINGAPORE STRAIT:

A total of 31 piracy/armed robbery incidents were recorded in the Singapore Strait in 2019, compared to only seven in 2018. 16 of the 31 incidents occurred in the eastbound lane, with 12 of them occurring between 23 November and 30 December 2019. They involved the clandestine boarding of bulk carriers and tankers, with reports of crew being confronted and threatened. In at least one of the eastbound lane incidents, crew also suffered minor injuries.

ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN

Masters of ships transiting the above noted 'Areas of Concern' are advised by ReCAAP to action the preventive measures recommended in the '[Regional Guide to Counter Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia](#)'. These include exercising enhanced vigilance, maintaining look-out for suspicious boats and reporting all incidents to the nearest Coastal State immediately.

If a vessel should come under attack, or an attack appears imminent, then ReCAAP recommends that the Master should:

- Sound the pre-determined ship alarm to signal an attack to the crew and to muster at their attack defence station.
- Activate the ship security alert system to alert the company security officer (CSO) and the flag state.
- Transmit a distress signal alert.
- Ensure that the AIS is switched ON to assist vessels responding to the distress call
- Sound the ship's whistle/foghorn to show any potential attacker that the crew is aware of the attack and is reacting to it.
- Increase speed to maximum possible to outdistance the attackers. Consider evasive action if the circumstances warrant it.
- Alter course away from the approaching craft if possible. If sea conditions allow, consider altering course to increase an approaching craft's exposure to wind/waves.

- Confirm all entry points/doors are secured and the crew accounted for and safe in accordance with ship procedures.
- Report the attack as soon as possible to the nearest Coastal State. In addition, contact by phone both the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) and the Company Security Officer.

CONCLUSION AND TAKEAWAY

Piracy and sea robbery continue to be considered by ReCAAP as a significant risk to ships and their crews in Asian waters. As stated by ReCAAP's Executive Director at a recent Singapore shipping forum:

"The 15% year-on-year increase in the actual number of incidents [72] in 2019 as well as a spike of incidents [31] in the Singapore Strait are a stark reminder that government agencies and the shipping industry should continuously uphold their respective efforts as a shared responsibility."

ReCAAP's statement answers, in the affirmative, the question posed in the title of this Risk Bulletin; "is vigilance still essential?" The statement also signposts the answer to the other question of whether media reporting of the ReCAAP 2019 report may have been alarmist in its presentation. MM's review is that some of the media reports appear to have presented elements of the ReCAAP data out of context, no doubt for dramatic effect. Despite this, the underlying ReCAAP data and full analysis of heightened piracy/sea robbery risk during 2019 is undoubtedly accurate and should not be ignored.

MM members are urged to ensure that anti-piracy/sea robbery measures are fully implemented onboard their vessels when they are entering and transiting Asian Waters. Further, when entering and transiting ReCAAP designated 'areas of concern', special attention must be given to optimising both full ISPS Code security compliance and the recommendations provided in the [ReCAAP Regional Guide to Countering Piracy/Sea Robbery](#). Members are also reminded of the anti-piracy/sea robbery and security information and links previously provided in [MM Risk Bulletin No. 8](#). Please ensure that your ship managers, masters and crews are made fully aware of these links and their own associated anti-piracy/sea robbery and ship security compliance obligations.