

Recent Development & Challenges: Mitigating Maritime Security Issues through Enhanced Maritime Domain Awareness



Captain (N) Matthew D. Coates, MSM, CD
Director Naval Strategy, Royal Canadian Navy

The NATO Maritime Experience

Synopsis: It is evident from attending many symposia, dialogues and higher-level gatherings that there is a professed collective will in the Indo-Pacific Region to ‘take the MDA relationship to the next level’ yet frustration in achieving this persists. Recent NATO experience in evolving the maritime mission in the Mediterranean area may offer insights and practical paths to achieving collective security through enhanced MDA, while maintaining full regard to sovereignty and the concerns of individual nations. This was achieved by having a politically sensitive multi-nation governance structure with confidence in a subordinate, yet effectively quite independent Operational organization.

Presentation:

For the past several years, in many Indo-Pacific regional fora, a desire to ‘take the shared awareness relationship to the next level’ has been repeatedly expressed. I suspect our Lankan hosts despite having a capacious vocabulary will soon run out of elaborate ways of expressing the Galle Dialogue theme and start saying “Lets get on with it for goodness sake”. ‘Operationalizing’ this intent has been slow to materialize, with some significant regional exceptions such as ReCaap, the Asia

Pacific Group (APG) on Money Laundering (which includes Canada/USA as the only extra regional nations), and of course the Malacca Strait Patrol with the attendant information sharing and reconnaissance activities. Apologies if I have missed anyone.

Therefore, I have chosen some examples of ‘ways ahead’ which have been used to overcome the challenges of establishing a collective security framework, or less grandiosely, shared maritime domain awareness. Again, this is based on my personal experience either designing these frameworks, operating in them over a long period, and most important mid-wiving their birth or shepherding them through important changes.

I am not going to suggest any specific structures, display organization charts or infrastructure footprints, framework nation concepts etc. but I can speak to these, and the recent experiences of other regions, or questions of shared sovereignty in the Q+A if asked. Besides, looking out at the sea of young commanders about to decant from Staff College I am sure there is no shortage of innovative ideas in this regard.

Indo-Pacific thinking on a way ahead for increased Maritime Domain Awareness was aptly summed up at the Galle Dialogue 2016. The

attributes needed by some sort of regional shared maritime domain awareness entity were stated as: A Governance Structure, A Secretariat Function, A Standardization Function, a Planning Function and a Coordination or Operations Function.

The Governance Function - NATO

I chose this example rather than say a regional Operational level organization as NATO has an elaborate political aspect to the Governance Structure. This political sensitivity, embedded in and indeed on 'top' of the organization, is, in my sense, the key 'trust enabler' that would be needed for any consensus-based Indo-Pacific Organization to be collectively granted an information-sharing role let alone a co-ordination or operations role. Indeed, a NATO operational level truism is that you know a military operation or planning effort is very important if the file is assigned to the Political Affairs Division instead of the Operations Division. Just to be clear, I am not advocating a full-blown emulation of NATO, but using it as an example that a governance structure which successfully weaves multi-nation political sensitivity and operational effect together, is possible. A realistic appraisal of the levels of ambition in the Indo-Pacific region does not reveal a desire for a NATO-like integration, but perhaps one that is more robust than the SHADE or Shared Awareness and Deconfliction activity in the western Indian Ocean. However, the Maritime Domain seems to be furthest along in at least earnestly desiring to evolve some existing regional bodies into something with more rigour and measurable output, as evident by this continuous refrain at maritime-centric gatherings in the region.

Generating Operational effect despite having a Governance Structure

Nearly all of us here are familiar with the, often "Joint", Operational Planning Process (OPP). In an Alliance context, this process involves in effect a built-in political consultation process, actual 'steps' in the dreaded planning flowchart. Again, for Staff College commanders in the

audience, when you see this flowchart appear on your desk, you know you will shortly be explaining to your family why you cannot come home for the impending holiday weekend. Thus, your reaction to NATO OPP would likely be the same as mine: "I didn't think it would be possible to make planning even more Byzantine".

I became converted though. Planning in a consensus construct, which I assess is the only future construct which would achieve acceptance this region, becomes an iterative process designed to ensure that a truly superb maritime plan is not dead on arrival at the strategic level due to being politically naïve. Therefore, there are steps designed to shape 'downward' and inform 'upward' so staff effort and leadership schedule is not wasted. This not to say the staff process is politicized – the opposite. One of the mistakes made by neophyte planners on an international staff is their temptation to 'represent their country's wishes' at the operational level. They are quickly, either by someone like me, or by their own nation in most instances, informed that only their most senior military and diplomatic representatives are empowered or qualified to truly 'know' what their nation 'really wants'. What your nation wants from you is good naval staff work. Furthermore, your deviously brilliant higher national representatives or diplomats may desire something unpalatable to be in a policy or planning document to which they can graciously acquiesce in the spirit of consensus, but thereby gain collegial leverage in another more important item. Ill informed sanitization below the strategic level may actually remove options and flexibility needed by your nation.

There is professional satisfaction to be derived from all this 'operational bureaucracy'. When consensus approval is achieved by planning by the rules and then seeing the sincere pleasure at the strategic and political level it is indeed gratifying. This is not a hollow thing – when a large group of diverse nations are publicly resolved to be like minded on an issue of operational importance it sends a powerful message. For the Indo-Pacific the message could be "We agree to 'own' our maritime neighbourhood within International

Law and here are the Means and Ways”.

As a caution, there is an often-insurmountable challenge in the field of consensus building. It is achieving agreement on “The Recognized Threat”, or “Recognized Maritime Threat” for our purposes. My suggestion is not to attempt anything elaborate – it is a recipe for acrimony and a defined “Threat” as such is not needed until any future Indo-Pac MDA effort is mature. Once nations have deemed that their initial effort in the maritime domain warrants further evolution, then perhaps the time is ripe if further activity in this area. Fortunately, not having to minutely define ‘the threat’ is the appeal of a Maritime Security Operation (MSO). However, the successes of an operational level agreement to mitigate maritime security issues can be a ‘forcing function’ for more a robust regional maritime coordination and sharing arrangement. Shortly, I will describe a maritime security operation (MSO), with seven standard sub-missions, selectable (or not) by nations.

Creating and Evolving Enhanced Maritime Domain Awareness using an MSO

I would like to unpack the experience of evolving an existing maritime operation (Active Endeavour) into a multi-national Maritime Security Operation (Sea Guardian) , and what best practices, lessons learned, or insights can be gained and considered for use by an Indo Pacific region eager to collectively mitigate maritime security issues.

In the Allied construct, the MSO Missions or if preferred, Lines of Operations are: Maritime Situational Awareness (MSA), Counter Terrorism, Maritime Capacity Building, Freedom of Navigation, Maritime Interdiction, Counter Proliferation and Protection of Critical Infrastructure. Now these would seem on the face of it uncontentious missions, and, a reasonable mission set for any initial Indo-Pacific initiative. Frankly though, they are surprisingly contentious, perhaps more so in this region, but I would submit that the challenges in the maritime domain here

act as a powerful incentive to collective problem solving.

MSA is the ‘entry level, mission but does require information exchange protocols, staff and infrastructure, whether wholly national with inter-national links, or a purpose-built node with international staff. I favour the latter, as again a forcing function to cooperation, commitment, and cross pollination between maritime cultures. The ‘MSA node’ requires an agile mind set in its charter and SOPs. It needs to recognize that many nations already consider themselves capable of gaining their own MSA and Intelligence and acting upon it, or not, thank you very much. Nations will point out that they are content to arrange bilateral exchange mechanisms if needed - most have. But if a nation acquires information they assess would benefit the whole and wishes to widely share same, an MSA node is ideal for information dissemination. The node is an enabler of the MSA web, not a commander. It is a learning experience for nations and a positive one – but give it time. This should not be contentious and is the recommended starting point for any “operationalization” of regional intent.

Support to Preventing Maritime Terrorism. In the Sea Guardian context, this was a direct evolution from OAE, and straightforward. Our Lankan hosts know exactly the capacity of the maritime domain to support asymmetric conflict. Some present may consider this MSO Task a non-starter given past events in the region. If kept generic, and one does not become bogged down in defining terrorism or terrorists, including this particular MSO task should be possible. After all, who wants to be seen to be arguing in favour of maritime terrorism? However, this Task should be left as an “on order “Task, which I will explain later, if it is too contentious.

Maritime (Security) capacity building. Do it. Include it. In the NATO context, this is building capacity generally in partner nations, those in cooperation initiatives etc. In the Indo-Pacific region this could be any stakeholder, practically speaking it will be larger players

helping smaller ones. I was going to say “larger stakeholders” but that is not a correct term. Smaller nations may have a disproportionately large stake in an outcome or resource sustainability – it may be an existential issue for them, but just a data point for others. In any case, adjacent areas of weak maritime governance affect the neighbourhood. Hence the expression “fish don’t recognize borders”.

These first three became the standing “pre-approved” MSO tasks.

The Creation of “On Order” Tasks

The next four Tasks were unable to achieve consensus approval as standing tasks, but a description of the process is relevant, as you may have a similar experience. Several nations were very eager to move evolve OAE into a non-Article 5 MSO, refresh it in the process, “deepen and broaden regional engagement” and move on. Others, given their national military funding arrangements, were quite content with a ‘named Article 5 operation’. As is a best practice, various nations, on the Alliance political and strategic level, formed ad hoc working groups to derive solutions and compromises. A vital enabler was the “on call, all hours “support of maritime experts which ensured the that the stakeholders had maritime advice immediately available often in person. In the end, evolving the mission, keeping it with a name and a formal obligation, with changes, but less scope than perhaps us maritime purists would have liked, became the way forward. The four remaining tasks were:

- Uphold Freedom of Navigation.
- Conduct Maritime Interdiction.
- Fight Proliferation of WMD.
- Protect Critical Infrastructure.

“All Stop” was the initial Engine Order on these four missions, due to geo-political baggage and how these terms were interpreted in various quarters. On the face of it, none of these missions appear contentious to a mariner. However, they

were seen by some nations as provocative, escalatory or endorsing one or more members’ national agenda. For example, Freedom of Navigation was encouraging “in your face “operations, which while perfectly legal, were not desired as a routine activity by all. Disagreement over Maritime Interdiction was somewhat expected given the varying views on conducting Boardings - Flag State consent/master’s consent, Law of Armed Conflict etc. As for Counter proliferation, anything with the acronym WMD in it will not generate consensus.

That leads us to the final order Task of Protecting Critical Infrastructure.

One would think that this would be an easy one, but no. I left discussing this Task to last as example of another enabler required in the Indo-Pacific Region – that is peaking the same strategic language, or more precisely speaking the same unwritten language. For example, to Naval officers, Infrastructure referred to undersea cables and their shore termini (my junior officers were all about protecting the internet at all costs), sea side power plants or cables, commodity terminals, resource exploitation platforms (to stop pollution disasters) and international ferry routes. However, to some nations, this mission was simple code for “Seizing oil on behalf of corporations”. Interesting ‘discussion’ ensued.

Ironically, it was the embedding the very political oversight function, which ‘mission focussed operational effect types’ may find chafing, that enabled a way forward. Firstly, there was the advantage of an established hierarchy and lines of communication. Therefore, a mechanism existed wherein cases could be made, and importantly the strategic culture of the political level was accustomed to ‘cases being made’ by people wholly on the same team as it were but having a different i.e. operational military perspective. This hierarchy is still inchoate in the Indo-Pacific region, with many fora and few linkages. I will acknowledge hat various obvious linkages and hierarchies have been proposed in various regional conferences. I would agree with those who have opined that

an “opposed but not adversarial” internal and external mode of interaction is not necessarily the norm in all nations in this region. However, once again I will refer to the assertion that the maritime domain professionals in the Region seem to be the most open to moving forward, and hence may play a role greater broadening and deepening cooperative maritime security.

The case that was made, and won, was that these four contentious Tasks were not beyond the realm of possibility. The operational argument that Maritime forces need to at least collectively practice these tasks to be ready and competent in them was quite persuasive. Another persuasive factor was that in multiple strategic level Command Post Exercises (CPX), maritime forces

were usually the first to be authorized to move, as generally their movement is on the global maritime commons a wholly sovereign act. Finally, in a deliberate education and exercise effort, after a prolonged period of land conflict in central Asia, nations had recently been ‘re-informed’ of the extraordinary utility of general-purpose maritime forces. These three factors persuaded nations to accept the four “On Order Only” tasks being included in the Operation.

In the end, by ‘speaking as one’ from a purely maritime/naval operational perspective, AND by being engaged and with the political level, to quote the Rolling Stones: “You can’t always get what you want, but if you try, sometimes you get what you need.”