

Cooperative efforts among maritime stakeholders to strengthen security in the Singapore Strait

The Singapore Strait (SS) is one of the world's busiest shipping lanes in the world with more than 1,000 vessels passing through daily, many of which, are large and fully laden, and thus slow with limited manoeuvrability. Sharing the SS are also traditional fishermen plying their trade, adding to the high traffic density. This makes surveillance and enforcement actions against maritime crime challenging especially in hours of darkness; closer collaboration between the authorities and shipping community is thus crucial in ensuring the safety and security for all shipping in the SS.

Over the past two years, the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) observed an increase of theft and robbery incidents in the SS, likely a result of COVID-19 impacting regional economies and causing locals to resort to maritime crime to make ends meet¹. Nonetheless, it is important to note that while the number of incidents increased in recent years, majority were unsuccessful attempts, with perpetrators often fleeing empty handed upon sighting by the crew.

The modus operandi (MO) of the perpetrators in the SS remain consistent with that of petty crime; they are often opportunistic and non-confrontational in nature. Bulk carriers (43.5%) remain the prime target, followed by tankers (39.1%) and tugs-and-barges (17.4%). Perpetrators usually move in small boats of two to six persons and target vessels with low freeboard of less than 7m and slow speed of 7 to 12 knots, boarding the targeted vessels from the aft using grapnel hook or ladder. IFC observed that perpetrators tend to approach vessels that do not adopt or had encountered lapses in their shipboard protection measures. There were also three occasions where there were multiple attempts in the same night within close proximity, indicating the possibility that the same group of perpetrators targeted other vessels after unsuccessful initial attempt(s)².

Regional authorities are concerned and have been stepping up enforcement efforts. Navies from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand continue to strengthen cooperation through the Malacca Straits Patrol initiative, sharing assessments and information to cue operational responses. At the bilateral level, key principals from local and regional enforcement agencies also meet regularly to discuss cooperative initiatives, some of which, are assessed to have borne some fruit in curtailing the continued spike of incidents in the SS. For example, the IFC has worked closely with Singapore Government agencies such as the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA), to encourage vessels to maintain vigilance and adopt recommended shipboard protection measures while transiting identified areas of concern in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, and collaborated with ReCAAP ISC to update the Regional Guide 2 to Counter Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (2022), a comprehensive guide providing MARSEC awareness, recommendations and updated contact details of the relevant agencies for the shipping community. The Indonesian authorities also formed a Special Task Force in Mar 2022 to conduct enforcement efforts along the coastlines of Bintan and Batam.

¹ In the period from Jan to May, IFC recorded a total of 15 sea theft and robbery incidents in the SS in 2020 and 2021 each. There were 25 incidents recorded in the SS from Jan to May 2022, which is significantly higher compared to the last two years.

² The incidents occurred on 8 Jan, 16 Feb and 2 Mar in this year.



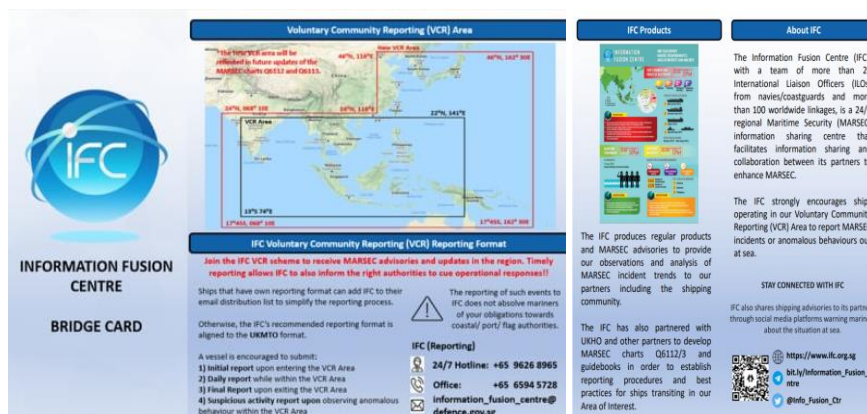
Capture of perpetrators by the authorities

While the regional authorities continue to lead overall efforts, the contributions of the shipping community cannot be understated. For example, in Jan 2022, the ship crew of a tanker sounded the alarm, which caused five perpetrators onboard a sampan who were trying to board the tanker to flee immediately. The ship master subsequently reported the incident to the local authorities and enforcement units were quickly deployed to the vicinity to deter subsequent attacks. This reaffirms IFC's assessment that given the nature and MO of the perpetrators in the SS, the following resource-light shipboard measures can be sufficient to deter potential boarding(s): (a) maintain all-round lookout from an elevated position with focus on suspicious small crafts approaching or in proximity to the ship's aft, (b) turn on weather deck lighting around the accommodation block and rear-facing lighting on the poop deck, and (c) sound the ship's alarm and immediately inform regional authorities when suspicious small crafts are sighted.

The IFC recognises the key role that the shipping community plays in strengthening the robustness of overall enforcement efforts, and as such, has been stepping up engagements to provide MARSEC situation updates and share best practices through activities such as company visits, Shared Awareness Meetings. In recent years, we have also strengthened practical cooperation and mutual understanding through company security drills and exercises, involving merchant vessels participating real-time at sea. Initiatives like IFC's Voluntary Community Reporting (VCR) for ships to report MARSEC incidents or anomalous behaviours out at sea, and the IFC Bridge Card to provide a quick reference guide for ships during incidents, have also been well received.



IFC visit to shipping company



IFC Bridge Card

In summary, the fight against sea theft and robbery is a shared responsibility that requires strong collaboration among all stakeholders. Only through international cooperation among the maritime enforcement agencies and shipping community can we ensure safe and secure seas for all. Timely and expeditious reporting to the local authorities or the IFC is important so that immediate action can be taken. IFC provides timely operational cueing through the International Liaison Officers (ILOs) who act as the link between IFC and their respective operation centres. If an incident does occur onboard, ships or shipping companies should cooperate with coastal state authorities and provide information such as photos or videos for follow-on investigation.³

The IFC is a regional MARSEC info-sharing hub that was established in 2009 to collate and sense-make information concerning merchant shipping to provide awareness and pass on actionable information to its partners to cue operational responses. As of June 2022, the IFC had 19 ILOs from 18 countries deployed in the centre and had established worldwide linkages with 100 partners from 42 countries which include navies, coastguards, maritime agencies and influential shipping associations such as INTERPOL, UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime), Singapore Shipping Association (SSA).

³ We have seen successful apprehension of perpetrators on land because there were useful evidences provided to IFC which we could extend to relevant authorities.