

Al-Qaeda and the Maritime Domain.
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Let me begin by outlining some of the foiled, failed and successful attempts in maritime-related terrorism over the last decade. I want to rehearse this recent history because there is a tendency to overlook or downplay what has happened, and thus ignore the possibility of further trouble. It is clear that terrorists can see the potential of using the maritime trading system and its land links through the cargo container supply chain to conceal weapons or agents for attack purposes or to provide funding or support for their operations. The terrorist network associated with al-Qaeda understands the vital role of sea transport and has exploited it for years.

For example, an al-Qaeda-controlled cargo ship delivered the explosives that its operatives used to bomb two US embassies in East Africa in August 1998, killing 224 people and injuring more than 5,000. US investigators say they have evidence that al-Qaeda was buying ships at least as early as 1994.

In September 2004, two al-Qaeda operatives were sentenced to death and four others jailed in Yemen for the suicide attack in October 2000 on the American destroyer USS Cole. They used a small boat packed with explosives to ram and seriously damage one of the US navy's most sophisticated warships. An earlier attempt to attack another American destroyer, USS The Sullivans, in Yemen had failed when the over-laden attack boat sank. It was salvaged and used in the operation to strike the USS Cole. The blast, which left a gaping hole in the side of the destroyer, killed 17 American sailors and wounded 40. It took more than 14 months and cost around US\$250 million to repair the ship.

In October 2002, two years after the USS Cole was hit, the French-registered oil tanker, Limburg, carrying crude oil off the coast of Yemen, was crippled and set ablaze in another terrorist attack using an explosive-laden small boat. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility.

In April 2004, suicide terrorists in several small boats packed with explosives tried to attack laden tankers and pumping and storage facilities in the main oil export terminal in southern Iraq. The attack boats either blew up or were blown up before they reached their targets. But they came perilously close and it took several days to restore normal output from the terminal. The assault had the hallmarks of an al-Qaeda or al-Qaeda-inspired operation. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, in a statement issued shortly afterwards, claimed responsibility for the attack. As you know, this head of al-Qaeda in Iraq was killed in June but the movement is under new leadership and fights on.

The terrorist group led by Zarqawi, who was born in Jordan, claimed responsibility for the Katyusha rocket attack in August last year that narrowly missed hitting two US warships in the Jordanian Red Sea port of Aqaba. Also in August 2005, authorities in Turkey arrested Louai Sakka, a senior al-Qaeda operative and longtime associate of Zarqawi in Iraq. Sakka was picked up and interrogated after a one-ton bomb he was making in a rented harbourside apartment in the resort town of Antalya, in southern Turkey, went off prematurely. He had intended to put the bomb into final shape on his 27-foot motorized yacht, the Tufan, which was moored in a marina close to the apartment. Sakka planned to ram the explosive-laden yacht into a cruise ship carrying Israelis - and, he believed, US soldiers on rest and recreation - as it approached Antalya to disembark passengers. Sakka said later that he was prepared to attack NATO warships in the area if he was unable to locate Israeli passenger vessels.

Abd al Rahim al-Nashiri, captured in late 2002, gave CIA investigators information that reinforced concerns about plans for terrorist attacks against shipping. He was al-Qaeda's head of operations in and around the Arabian peninsula and its de facto naval chief. Al-Nashiri is the alleged mastermind of the attack on the USS Cole and the tanker Limburg. He has also been linked to the bombings of the two US embassies in east Africa in 1998.

In addition, Al-Nashiri confessed to planning attacks on shipping in the Strait of Gibraltar. Early in 2002, he sent a team of several Afghan-trained Saudis to Morocco to prepare for bomb-laden speedboat attacks on US and British warships as they passed through the strait between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. The Moroccan intelligence service, working with Western intelligence agencies, foiled the scheme.

Evidently drawing on information from interrogation of Al-Nashiri and other captured al-Qaeda operatives, President George Bush said last October that America and its partners in the war on terror had disrupted at least 10 serious al-Qaeda terrorist plots since 9/11. Two of these attempts were directed against shipping.

The White House noted that in the first, in late 2002 and 2003, the US and a partner nation disrupted a plan by al-Qaeda operatives to attack ships in the Arabian Gulf. This may be a reference to an abortive attempt to bomb the US Navy's Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrein in the Persian Gulf, a plan linked to Al-Nashiri who was captured in the United Arab Emirates in November 2002. Or it may be a reference to another audacious plot Al-Nashiri was working on at the time of his arrest. He was arranging funding to crash a small aircraft into the bridge of Western navy vessel when it was docked in the UAE's Port Rashid.

The White House said that in the second plot in 2002, the US and partners disrupted a plan to attack vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping channel both for tankers carrying oil exports from the Gulf to Asia, Europe and America, and for US and allied warships patrolling the area and supporting military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Al-Nashiri's procurement arm in the United Arab Emirates, through a series of front companies, had bought a general cargo vessel and several small fast attack boats. The aim was to fit a special lifting rig on deck to lower the boats, packed with shaped explosive charges, into the water when they were close to the Hormuz strait, which about 40 miles wide. The waterway consists of 2-mile wide channels for separate inbound and outbound tanker traffic, with a 2-mile wide buffer zone between them. Once in position within striking distance of a passing US warship, the small craft manned by suicide crew were to be launched from the mother ship in a combined attack from different directions on the chosen target. The freighter itself was to be loaded with explosives and blown up in the shipping lanes as close as possible to the transiting US naval target. The plot was reportedly intended to coincide with the attacks on the US in September 2001. But Al-Nasheri, fearing that the operation's coordinators were under surveillance, called it off.

Maritime terrorism has not been confined to the Middle East, Africa and the Mediterranean. In Southeast Asia, al-Qaeda's affiliates, including the Abu Sayaff Group, the ASG, and Jemaah Islamiyah, the JI, have attacked shipping or planned to do so.

Philippine officials say that the Abu Sayaff - working with the Rajah Solaiman Movement, made up of converts to Islam from among the Christian majority in the Philippines - was responsible for placing the bomb that sank a passenger ferry, the MV Superferry 14, in Manila Bay in February 2004, leaving 116 people either dead in the fire or drowned or still missing, presumed dead. In terms of loss of life, this is the worst maritime terrorist attack in recent years. In August last year, another bomb on a ferry, MV Dona Ramona, docked in the southern Philippines, injured at least 30 people. Security officials said the incendiary device was the work of Abu Sayaff terrorists.

The Singapore government has said that when it started its crackdown in December 2001 on Jemaah Islamiyah - the Southeast Asian terrorist network with links to al-Qaeda and Abu Sayyaf militants - it discovered that the group had made preliminary plans for suicide attacks on US warships visiting Singapore. The JI also intended to carry out multiple truck bomb attacks against Western and Israeli diplomatic and other targets in Singapore, including naval bases used by the American military, and had started buying the ammonium nitrate to be used in the explosives.

The plans to attack US warships with explosive-laden small boats manned by foreign suicide bombers were started in the mid-1990s and were fairly well developed, although never activated. They included a detailed targeting map for a seaborne attack using a small craft against US naval vessels traveling eastwards from Singapore's Sembawang Wharf, in the northern part of the island state opposite Malaysia, via Tekong Island. The markings on the map identified a strategic "kill" zone where the channel was narrowest and where the target ship would have had no room to take evasive action to avoid colliding with the suicide boat. The plan took advantage of local geography to hide the attack boat from radar and visual detection until the very last minute. The route and patrol schedule of Singapore's Police Coast Guard in the area had also been monitored.

In early 2001, the plans were revived when two unidentified Middle-Easterners approached Faiz bin Abu Bakar Bafana, the Malaysian JI leader, for information on US military vessels in Singapore. Faiz then instructed members of the JI in Singapore to survey Sembawang Wharf and Changi Naval Base, both of which were being used by visiting American warships. They video-recorded what they observed and a copy of the video was later given to the Middle-Easterners in Kuala Lumpur.

The planning for the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen in October 2000 began in Malaysia. One of the key suspects – Walid bin Attash, also known as Khallad – is said by US officials to have directed the Cole attack with al-Qaeda maritime commander Al-Nasheri. Khallad was plotting another attack on a US naval vessel visiting a Malaysian port in 2000. Less than year later, Malaysian intelligence foiled a plan to attack a second US warship.

These are examples terrorist attacks on naval and commercial vessels or plans to attack them and the bases from which they operated. However, al-Qaeda has also shown interest in cargo containers on ships to ferry agents, weapons and terrorist-related material around the world. Shortly before his capture in Pakistan in March 2003, al-Qaeda's director of global operations, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, offered to invest about \$US200,000 in an export firm in exchange for access to the containers used by the firm to ship garments to Port Newark in the New York-New Jersey harbour complex. He wanted to use the containers to smuggle explosives into the US for various al-Qaeda attacks. As you know, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed is the alleged mastermind of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. His interest in ships and their cargo containers, and the fact that he was prepared to invest an unusually large amount of al-Qaeda's money in a company that regularly moved goods into the maritime heart of the US financial capital, must be regarded as an ominous warning sign.

The millions of containers that carry most of today's general cargo around the world are a security nightmare. These uniform steel boxes are potential Trojan Horses in the 21st century when advanced technology, including weapons and the information needed to build and operate them, is increasingly accessible to terrorists and criminals. Just as it is easy to hide smuggled goods and people inside a container, so it is easy to conceal arms or bombs. Once a container is loaded and sealed, inspection is a problem. The contents can be misrepresented and undeclared items hidden inside with relative ease. Even when sealed, containers can be surreptitiously opened and then closed again without great difficulty to remove or add contents. This is a made-to-order method of transport for terrorists – just as it is for drug and other contraband smugglers.

More than 17 million containers are in circulation, criss-crossing the globe by sea and making over 230 million journeys through the world's ports each year. Some nine million containers arrive by sea in US ports alone. Physical checks of containers reaching American ports by sea increased to 5.2% of total arrivals by September 2003, from 2% two years earlier. But worldwide, less than 1% of shipped cargo is screened using Gamma-Ray devices and radiation detectors to peer inside and check for explosives, radioactive substances or other dangerous materials. However, security officials in the

US and other countries say that the key to preventing a terrorist attack using cargo containers is not the amount of physical inspection that takes place. It is the ability to marshal intelligence on the contents of the boxes so that only suspect ones are chosen for inspection, while the genuine trade proceeds without delay.

The fear that terrorists could exploit the container transport system was confirmed barely a month after the al-Qaeda hijackers crashed civilian airliners into the World Trade Centre twin towers and the Pentagon. In October 2001, authorities in the southern Italian port of Gioia Tauro discovered an unusually well-equipped and neatly dressed stowaway locked inside a shipping container. It was furnished as a makeshift home with a bed, water, supplies for a long journey and a bucket for a toilet. Italian police named the stowaway as Rizik Amid Farid and said he was born in Egypt but carried a Canadian passport.

Unlike most stowaways, Farid was smartly dressed, clean-shaven and rested as he emerged. He was found to be carrying two mobile phones, a satellite phone, a laptop computer, several cameras, batteries and, ominously given recent events in the US, airport security passes and an airline mechanic's certificate valid for four major American airports. Gioia Tauro is a leading trans-shipment hub for cargo in the Mediterranean. The container fitted out as a makeshift home had been loaded in Port Said, Egypt. Had the stowaway not been trying to widen ventilation holes when workers in Gioia Tauro were nearby, the box may well have passed unhindered to its final destination in Canada via Rotterdam. After he was discovered, Farid was investigated by Italian prosecutors who suspected that he was an al-Qaeda operative. He was charged with illegal entry into Italy and detained. But a court released him on bail and he disappeared before further information about him and the purpose of his unorthodox means of travel could be gathered.

More recently, on 14 March 2004, two Palestinian suicide bombers gained access to the Israeli seaport of Ashdod, near Tel Aviv, by concealing themselves in a 40-foot container. They hid in a secret compartment behind a false wall at the back of the box which was loaded with marble and ceramic tiles. An electronic scan and a physical inspection of the container, both inside and out, by Israeli officials failed to detect the bombers. In blowing themselves up, they killed 10 port workers and injured 18. It was the first attack in a closely guarded Israeli port, which was considered one of the most secure in the world. It shows how cargo containers can be used to hide people on military or terrorist operations. In July 2002, Israeli security officials in Ashdod had seized a shipment of guns and other weapons intended for Palestinian militants. Two months earlier, a container - supposedly filled with a donation of toys sent to the Gaza Strip by an Islamic charity - had been opened by officials in Ashdod and found to be packed instead with hundreds of pounds of guns, ammunition, telescopic lenses and night-vision equipment.

So let me sum up what I have said. If you look at the plans and operations of the first generation of al-Qaeda leaders like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Abd al Rahim al-Nashiri and others, it is clear that by 2001 and 2002 they were conducting trial runs for

opening a maritime-related front in global terrorism. They could see that the vast shipping and cargo container business around the world was open to infiltration and abuse. They could also see that naval ships are iconic targets.

Why then have terrorists not succeeded, at least so far, in causing greater damage to naval operations and to international shipping and the cargo container supply chain that carry the bulk of world trade?

First, many of the trans-national terrorist network's most capable and ruthless planners have been killed or captured. They include Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, al Nashiri, Khallad and eleven others whom President Bush said last week had been transferred to Guantanamo Bay detention centre in Cuba for trial before military tribunals.

Second, there has also been a worldwide crackdown on the sources of terrorist finance, their communications and means of moving money around. In addition, counter-terrorist cooperation and intelligence sharing between nations and among law enforcement agencies have been enhanced in recent years, although there is still much room for improvement.

Third, it will take time not just to replace dead or captured planners but also to put any major maritime-related operation into effect. Remember that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed started to think about how to strike New York and Washington with hijacked planes in 1995, six years before the plot was actually carried out. According to the 9/11 Commission Report, al-Qaeda's chief, Osama bin Laden, himself approved the proposal in late 1998 or early 1999 – two and a half years before the strikes took place.

Fourth, the shipping business, like the aviation industry, is now better protected by a range of measures to prevent terrorist attacks. So, too, are the US Navy and other naval forces around the world that have learned protective lessons since the attack on the USS Cole six years ago next month.

The international community, spurred by the US, has tightened controls over the movement of containerised cargo at sea and on land. But given the scale of maritime trade and the huge volume of commerce moving through the global supply chain in cargo containers, the task is far from complete. Indeed, assuring total security from terrorism in a trading system designed to maximise efficiency and minimise costs is probably impossible, even if a new generation of so-called smart and secure containers become affordable and universally used, and all containers shipped on international trade routes by sea are scanned at their departing and arriving terminals.

Accurate and timely intelligence of any terrorist threat will remain the key to success. Those looking for signs of terrorist activity on ships or among the many millions of containers moving around the world by sea carrying legitimate cargo are checking for the proverbial needle in the haystack. And they are under pressure to do so without unnecessarily slowing global trade or increasing its cost.

A fifth reason why terrorists have not succeeded, at least so far, in causing greater damage to shipping may lie in the breakdown of centralized control. In the past few years, al-Qaeda has franchised its ideology around the world following the loss of Afghanistan as a base and training area. Holed up - possibly in the porous border zone between Afghanistan and Pakistan – al-Qaeda's leaders have watched as affiliates and emulators, often in home-grown and largely autonomous cells, have taken root and launched their own terrorist activity in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, Australia, Canada and the US itself.

So far, this wave of second generation al-Qaeda inspired terrorism has been directed against mainly land-based and air targets, including laden jet airliners, crowded commuter rail systems; US embassies and consulates; landmark buildings; places frequented by tourists; expatriate housing communities; and oil production, refining and storage facilities. Using remotely detonated explosions or suicide bombers to attack targets that are part of everyday urban and industrial life may be easier, cheaper and quicker to organize than striking from the sea. These attacks on 'soft' targets are planned and carried out in secret by just a few people using relatively small amounts of explosives that can be bought and put together without great difficulty. Such attacks are hard to detect and stop. Yet they are effective in causing fear and conveying a political message.

However, Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, the Syrian-born strategist for decentralized global jihad who was arrested in Pakistan last October and then handed over to US intelligence agents, has urged clandestine terrorist cells to use weapons of mass destruction or radiological bombs if they can get them. This nightmare scenario, in which terrorists would move from a position of relative technological weakness to approximate symmetry of power with their perceived enemies in the US and elsewhere, is no longer unthinkable. A survey was commissioned in late 2004 and early 2005 by the US Senate Foreign Relations chairman Richard Lugar. It canvassed the views of more than 80 international arms control and national security experts. They put the likelihood of a nuclear, biological, chemical or radiological attack in the next 10 years at 70%. There was strong, though not unanimous, agreement that any nuclear attack is more likely to be carried out by a terrorist organization than a government. A majority of those surveyed said a black market purchase was the most likely way for terrorists to get nuclear weapons or fissile material.

There may be another looming threat as well: the prospect of intensified international terrorism on an increasingly wide range of fronts - on land, in the air and at sea - as Sunni and Shiite radicals compete, and perhaps in some cases cooperate, to spread political violence. The rise of Shiites in Iraq and Lebanon, backed by the Shia theocracy in Iran, is challenging traditional Sunni Arab authority in the Middle East, creating new ferment and instability. So far, al-Qaeda and other Sunni extremists have shown most interest in maritime-related terrorism. They have been exclusively involved in nearly all the plans and operations I have talked about so far.

But the Lebanese Hizbollah and other arms of the Iranian-sponsored terrorist movement have also carried out or considered maritime-related strikes against Israel, and against Israeli and US targets abroad. These operations may spread if the US, supported by Israel, assembles an effective coalition of countries opposed to Iran's nuclear ambitions or if the fragile truce in Lebanon breaks down and hostilities resume between Hizbollah and Israel.

Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the military wing of Fatah claimed responsibility for the container attack in the Israeli port of Ashdod in March 2004. They are all Sunni Arab militant groups. But the Lebanese Hizbollah and Iran have become increasingly involved in the Palestinian struggle against Israel in recent years, providing arms and other assistance to fighters of Hamas and other units. Israeli forces have intercepted at least three major shipments of these weapons by sea in the last five years.

In the most recent, in May 2003, naval commandos boarded an Egyptian fishing boat, the Abu Hassan. Of the eight people aboard, at least one was a Hizbollah operative. Hidden in the vessel were fuses for Katyusha rockets, electronic bomb-making components, materials used to make explosive vests for suicide bombers and Hizbollah compact discs containing instructions. The biggest arms haul was taken from a 4,000-tonne freighter, the Karine A, in January 2002. Seized off the Israeli Red Sea port of Eilat, it was found to be carrying 50 tons of rockets, mines, anti-tank missiles, guns and C-4 plastic explosives from Iran for Palestinian terrorists. A year earlier, in May 2001, Israeli naval forces intercepted the Santorini, a 65-foot wooden boat laden with a large shipment of munitions that included SA-7 Strela man-portable anti-aircraft missiles.

While Hizbollah is based in Lebanon, it casts an increasingly long shadow across the Middle East and into other parts of the world. For example, in 1998, several operatives from the Iranian-backed network were planning to attack US naval vessels and Israeli commercial ships in Singapore or as they approached, using small boats packed with explosives. Singapore's Internal Security Department disclosed Hizbollah's activities in June 2002, saying that the operatives had been expelled after they tried to recruit Singaporeans and establish a cell in the island-state similar to those working elsewhere in Asia and in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. These cells have been heavily involved in fund raising, criminal activity and money laundering. They have also been preparing for terrorist attacks should Hizbollah and its patron, Iran, decide to launch them. Hizbollah gives Iran a global capability for retaliation.

The military wing of the Shiite Hizbollah movement in Lebanon is sometimes described as a militia. But the recent fighting with Israel has revealed it to be one of the best equipped guerrilla forces in the world. Among its arsenal of modern arms was a weapon not normally associated with even the fanciest guerrilla group. On 14 July, two days after Hizbollah triggered the conflict by capturing and killing some soldiers inside Israel, Hizbollah fired a number of C-802 radar-guided cruise missiles. One seriously damaged a naval gunboat helping to enforce Israel's blockade of Lebanon, killing several sailors. Another struck a civilian cargo ship off the Lebanese coast. Neither Israel nor the

US knew that Hizbollah fighters had such sophisticated weapons in their arsenal. As a result, the Israeli vessel did not have its missile-defence system on. Even if it had, the system would probably have been unable to protect it from the sea-skimming missile traveling at just under the speed of sound.

The C-802 is rated by experts as among the most lethal anti-ship missiles in the world. How did Hizbollah get such an advanced weapon? From Iran - by sea, air or overland through Syria, another Hizbollah ally. Iran bought at least 75 of the missiles from China in the mid-1990s. It reportedly received help from China and North Korea to extend their range and improve their accuracy. With its own product line, Teheran clearly felt it had enough of the C-802s to send some to Hizbollah in Lebanon and provide the training needed to operate them successfully. This episode illustrates the increasingly dangerous nexus between technology and terrorism. It also represents a quantum leap in the weaponry available for maritime-related terrorist attacks.