

Checkers or Chess? - The Maritime Security Dilemma

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In checkers, or “dam” as it is called in Malay, game pieces have the same status and move in a linear mode until they reach the opposite end of the board. Then, the winning game piece is “energised” which allows it to move freely at all directions. In chess, you move each piece differently based on its ability. Winning is about strategising moves and reaching a “check mate” where the opponent having the KING is checked.

When appreciating a complex security scenario, security professionals search for jigsaws in the landscape to see the big picture. There is no single answer when preparing for contingencies. Responses must be calibrated and swift, based on well-orchestrated moves, like playing chess. The utility of stakeholders is anticipated and optimized. One cannot play “dam” on security issues and move only in one direction when a strategy is required using multiple tools. Complexity is managed by anticipating actions. Bobby Fisher, the great chess champion, once said, “Winning in this game is all a matter of understanding how to capitalize on the strengths of each piece and timing their moves just right.”

The maritime security landscape today is vast and complicated. It includes contributions to global peace and security, safeguarding overseas interests, safeguarding sovereignty and maritime interests, enforcing the law on illegal cross border movements, illegal exploitation of maritime resources, piracy/armed robbery, search and rescue, disaster relief, and the list goes on. In addressing the issues and challenges affecting maritime security, one cannot be playing “dam”. One needs to be able to capture complexity like playing chess, moving separately in different directions anticipating every action through a well orchestrated contingency utilizing calibrated responses and synergizing collective efforts.

On thorny issues like maritime law enforcement, organized crime syndicates operate with multiple stakeholders in a variety of ways. What we see today is organized crime but disorganized enforcement as the focus is on the sea and not the

root cause. One cannot think linearly and play “dam” blaming inter-agency relationships in addressing crimes at sea as it is apparent that the network of fuelling and feeding from the crime comes from land. The complexity of the logistics chain of crime requires separate movements in various directions in land and sea as we are against an organized criminal network. The grand scheme is to deter and disrupt the network and successfully indict those responsible.

Likewise, in addressing search and rescue and disaster relief, one cannot focus on reacting to humanitarian assistance in separate scenarios whilst ignoring the fact that collective efforts and calibrated responses can be applied in any scenario. Government agencies cannot play “dam” on the preparations for incidents but need to look at it as a game of chessboard using separate stakeholders in concerted and coordinated actions.

Again, in safeguarding sovereignty and maritime interests, one cannot play “dam” and visualize events as they happen. Those responsible to safeguard these interests must widen their scope and look to strategising all efforts in a game of chess rather than just playing “dam”.