BRIEF

Asymmetric threats at sea: a perspective on three cases

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ABSTRACT
The international response to piracy through naval deployments off the Horn of Africa indicated that the piracy threat held a greater challenge than expected. The incompatibility between the war-fighting capabilities of the naval forces and the non-military status of the pirate groups can be attributed to the asymmetric nature of operations between the two actors. The piracy case off Somalia is not the only example of how asymmetry at sea offsets stronger and more sophisticated opponents. In a scenario closer to naval warfare, Iran with its Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy is an example of deliberate employment of asymmetry to counter the advantages of opposing naval forces in the Persian Gulf region. The Sea Tigers of the LTTE movement in Sri Lanka also portrays the use of asymmetry at sea, but by an irregular opponent against a regular navy. Whereas the pirates off Somalia do not deliberately employ asymmetry, but perhaps exploit the advantages, Iran made a conscious decision to plan and equip for asymmetry by investing in a naval force operating in parallel with its regular navy. In contrast, the Sea Tigers, being an irregular force, used asymmetry at sea through tactics and equipment to wage its low-intensity conflict against the Sri Lanka Navy. In each of the three cases, whether it is a deliberate military, insurgent or criminal strategy, the asymmetry in the respective threats has complex, if not dangerous, consequences for naval forces.

INTRODUCTION
Asymmetry can be used to describe several types of conflicts, and one general error often made is to associate asymmetry exclusively with irregular opponents waging a campaign against conventionally structured military forces under the control of a state. This, of course, leads to the classic debate about regular versus irregular and the prevalence today of the difficult state versus non-state profile of armed conflicts, which so many governments become entangled in. Another misleading notion is the skewed emphasis placed upon asymmetry in a landward context – whether deliberately or not. However, Mahnken, Professor of Strategy at the US Naval War College, points out how the Japanese made use of asymmetry in the naval battles at Guadalcanal during the Second World War to offset the numerical and technological superiority of the US forces.\(^1\) The Japanese achieved this through superior development of very particular skills (e.g., night operations) that blunted elements of the US naval superiority. As a result the Japanese forces managed to inflict significant damage on the US naval forces, even though they did not emerge as the final victor. One inherent danger in the asymmetry debate is the blurred limits of asymmetry, meaning that every conflict with some kind of divergence or difference involved becomes a candidate for the asymmetry label. Consequently, it is difficult to clearly define what asymmetry entails or does not entail.

For the purpose of this brief, asymmetry is taken to mean two things: asymmetry of capabilities and asymmetry of actors. The first element entails that superior technological capabilities play a role, but can be countered with lesser technologies employed in a creative way. Asymmetry of actors entails that an inferior enemy must employ a different approach against a stronger opponent.\(^2\) This leads to the view that asymmetry is either a given circumstance or an option exercised by an actor in the sense that they decide how to respond or not to respond. Actors can thus decide to deliberately prepare for and employ asymmetry or to merely harness it to survive within the opportunities it holds, or they may be in a position where asymmetry is a given aspect of a particular confrontational setting.

The case of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy constitutes an example of a deliberate decision to employ the advantages of asymmetry, in this case by selecting the arming strategy and developing the tactics deemed necessary to offset the best practices of a regular naval opponent who is stronger in numbers and technology. The Sea Tigers of the LTTE movement (The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam; a Tamil movement for an independent Tamil state in the north of Sri Lanka) present a situation where an irregular and weaker opponent exploits asymmetry at sea against a stronger opponent in a way that compels the adversary to temporarily change its doctrine and concept of operations. The Somali pirates off the Horn of Africa form an irregular threat and present what may be the most extreme example of asymmetry as they are neither a military opponent nor a threat to naval contingents, but rather an international security threat, which through international securitization has been elevated to a level that calls for naval forces to respond. In all three cases, the common denominator is the challenge to conventionally styled naval forces that have to cope with different forms of asymmetry from regular and irregular actors.

Asymmetry at sea is a present-day test for modern and post-modern navies as the debate on the role of the navies has a growing focus on roles residing outside the conventional naval warfighting spectrum. The debate on rising irregular threats at sea is also in step with a more general debate on warfighting where proponents of regular and irregular warfare attack or defend the dominance of the Clausewitzian paradigm of violent interstate warfare as the superior paradigm in the international system.\(^3\) Martin van Creveld, Edward Luttwak and John Keegan questions the latter interstate emphasis and favour or propose a greater role for the rising number of irregular threats on the international strategic landscape.\(^4\) In a similar fashion to what transpires on land, the critical debate is also found in the maritime domain where the proponents of fighting opposing navies for sea control find themselves confronted by an increasing array of voices pointing out the rise of opponents (both

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regular and irregular) who are using asymmetric tactics. In this way, the warfighting role of navies is assessed against opponents in pursuit of objectives that do not necessarily coincide with the objectives that states traditionally pursue through the use of their naval forces. In reality, the expectations of the contributions by naval forces are being stretched much wider to cover an increasing maritime threat landscape which is calling for order and security. Till reminds us of a need for more roles, but notes that these are not mutually exclusive and that each calls for its own set of capabilities. In the maritime domain this debate about ‘old and new roles’ is perhaps less visible, but nonetheless very important as threats at sea impact all the more visibly upon societies as demonstrated by the Somali pirates targeting food aid, the criminal and rebel attacks on oil infrastructure in the Gulf of Guinea and the anti-drug operations by navies in the Caribbean Sea.

The central point of this brief is to show, by means of three examples, how asymmetry operates at sea and requires that naval forces respond to threats that could well reside on the fringes of their traditional warfighting cultures. The examples and argumentation presented point to the extended roles that navies need to be able to cope with the threat of asymmetry and the existing frameworks by means of which the naval forces are currently able to respond. While the Iranian case features roles fairly close to the traditional roles played by navies, the cases with the Sea Tigers and the pirates of Somalia expand the roles of navies more extensively to the fringes of their traditional roles and functions.

NOTHING NEW: REVISITING THE ROLE SPECTRUM OF NAVIES

It may be relevant at this point to sketch out the spectrum of roles that contemporary navies are playing on the world’s oceans. While the literature on sea power in general and navies in particular tend to emphasise the traditional warfighting role at sea to some extent, the urge to uphold the traditional warfighting role is constantly challenged by other roles that politicians ask or compel navies to play. In this way, similarly to the land forces, navies are constantly required to attend to more, but not necessarily dramatically new roles. In fact, history has exposed navies to a hierarchy of roles that have now become familiar for most modern navies. Two recent views highlight the preferred and eventually de facto roles that navies have to play. The first view is presented by Sloan, author of Modern Military Strategy: An Introduction, who refers to the ‘second post-Cold War decade’ and Mullen’s (former Chairman of US Joint Chiefs of Staff) views in particular that question the assumption that maritime matters not directly related to warfighting at sea have to take care of themselves. This ‘self-care’ assumption can no longer be accepted as valid since the ‘other’ matters have now become dangerous phenomena in themselves. The early twenty-first century is a time when partnerships in order to secure the oceans are necessary, and when selective preferences of navies for certain roles pose a danger to this objective. This period sees a growing need to

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secure the oceans for a wide array of interest groups, and by doing so the outbreak of wars may also be prevented. This warning resonates with the view presented by Band, former British First Sea Lord, who emphasises the need for societies and other constituencies to be made aware of, and show a better understanding of, the less glamorous roles that navies have to play during interwar periods to help ensure maritime security. Band points out the continuing, but less visible, role that navies play in contributing to maritime security; and he indirectly argues the case for navies being employed more widely in this role while also supporting landward deployments by way of their more traditional roles. Playing on both fields has thus become an imperative in the roles that navies play from and on the sea. Maritime security is therefore not something for ‘the others’ to take care of.

The above-mentioned outlooks emanate from views held by senior naval flag officers of the US and the UK respectively. They recognise the imperative for navies to master different roles, particularly at a time when the threat repertoire at sea is growing and can assume different forms and features beyond the traditional naval warfighting focus. The call to promote or support globalisation with its emphasis upon sea trade and thus secure oceans against interferences from regular or irregular threats falls within the same mode of thought. As for the latter, Till, Professor of Maritime Studies, Kings College London, contrasts the threats at sea with the optimism entrenched in allowing globalisation to play out on a free and secure ocean landscape to be safely traversed and responsibly exploited for the betterment of society. Direct attacks upon the system of maritime economics, the presence of international criminal groups at sea, and conflicts on land extending off-shore and taking on a maritime dimension all contribute to threats against the required maritime safety and security proposed by Till.

While comments are often made that navies have been playing several roles beyond warfighting at sea and in support of the landward battle, the early twenty-first century finds navies within a maritime realm where asymmetric opponents have become a dangerous threat. While navies have to operate across the role spectrum by for example supporting landward operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, performing anti-drug operations in the Caribbean, and patrolling the waters of the Mediterranean to intercept illegal immigrants or refugees, and protecting the flow of oil through the Persian Gulf, some dangerous asymmetrical threats have to be dealt with as well. The reference by Till to direct and less direct threats to the required maritime security on the oceans can be empirically linked to certain actors that present the dangers he outlines. The following discussion turns the attention to three different asymmetric threats at sea that not only complicate, but also add to the very busy schedule that modern navies are facing to assist in upholding good order at sea.

(10) Ibid., p. 4.
In this regard, good order at sea refers to security embedded in stability from the shore, safe exploitation of maritime resources, safe transportation, use of the sea as a source of information and exchange, as well as a source of power and dominion.\(^\text{11}\) It is this role of upholding good order at sea, which falls within the ambit of navies, that, according to Till, now plays such an important role in ensuring the maritime security alongside the hard security contributions from primarily naval forces.\(^\text{12}\)

The following three cases provide insight into the growing asymmetric threat spectrum that navies have to contend with. The first case refers to Iran and the deliberate infusion of asymmetry into their naval organisational architecture in order to be able to operate in the Persian Gulf, a crucial strait for energy transportation. The second case refers to the challenge of an insurgent threat at sea off the coast of Sri Lanka, where the weakness of a small navy was exploited to control its area of jurisdiction and thus create an insecure maritime landscape. The third case outlines piracy off the Horn of Africa resulting from criminal groups at sea proliferating disproportionately due to bad governance on land, which gave rise to the deployment of naval vessels in the anti-piracy role.

**THE IRANIAN REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS NAVY (IRGCN)**

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) poses a threat to a superior navy by means of a combination of asymmetry and revolutionary zeal. The significance of the IRGCN asymmetric threat is played out in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, which is also the world’s most important shipping route for oil with an estimated 17 million barrels passing through the Strait of Hormuz every day.\(^\text{13}\) The international strategic significance of this waterway has seen some naval encounters over the past few decades during which the Iranian navy did not do that well at all times. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the Tanker War that played out simultaneously in the Persian Gulf attested to the inferior position of the Iranian naval forces who had to tolerate the dominant presence of other big navies (US, Britain, France and Russia). These navies traversed the Persian Gulf to protect their interests (the flow of oil in particular) and this way also limited Iranian leeway to bring pressure upon Iraqi allies by controlling shipping in the Gulf waters.\(^\text{14}\) One way that the Iranians saw fit to offset this imbalance was for them to invoke asymmetry to work in their favour, and they commenced with this in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War and the Tanker War that ensued for most of the 1980s. By first employing asymmetry in tactics, the Iranians brought a dangerous dimension to the Persian

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(11) Ibid., pp. 286-287.
(12) Ibid., p. 286: Till offers a British definition of maritime security that comprises actions performed by military units in partnership with other government departments/agencies and international partners in the maritime environment to counter illegal activity and support the freedom of the seas in order to protect national and international interests.
Gulf and followed this up by deliberately restructuring organisationally for a parallel second and smaller navy existing alongside the conventional Iranian Navy, but one that was trained and equipped exclusively for asymmetric warfare.\textsuperscript{15}

Learning from the revolutionary fervour that helped stem the Iraqi forces on land, the Iranians turned the revolutionary energy to its naval domain as well in order to counteract its naval inferiority to the forces that would likely be deployed in this strategic, but volatile waterway. Bringing revolutionary zeal, speed and firepower together in a theatre well suited for smaller vessels appears to be a practical combination against opponents who have to respond by means of conventional vessels not well-suited for the shallow and geographically restricted Persian Gulf waters. By 2009 the Iranian naval threat in the waters of the Persian Gulf was perceived as a parallel revolutionary navy that had had 25 years to ready itself for an asymmetric confrontation in the Persian Gulf and was acknowledged by Western powers because of the dangers posed by the asymmetry of the IRGCN through mines, small submarines, coastal batteries and numerous heavily armed small craft employing swarming. The IRGCN set a dangerous asymmetric threat in a very volatile region of great international interest. Any conventional navy entering the Persian Gulf must thus expect to be confronted by the IRGCN as the defender of Iranian maritime interests, but also that of the wider Islamic world in a crucially strategic maritime space. Any such confrontation, even if merely potential in nature, could disrupt the free flow of energy supplies at sea that for example Till attempts to emphasise.

The IRGCN is primarily directed at the naval forces of the opponent in the Persian Gulf and in this way brings asymmetry to a navy-on-navy confrontation, but may also be used against shipping in general, if deemed necessary.\textsuperscript{16} Here the IRGCN portrays asymmetric capabilities through tactics infused with religious and ideological drive and with the defence of the Persian Gulf as their primary area of responsibility and operations. It reflects a duality often debated as to whether or not a service army has to structure, train and equip for both roles, with Iran showing their solution of a conventional and asymmetric navy coexisting, each with its own naval chief, platforms, area of operations and fighting culture for deployment against naval threats.

**THE SEA TIGERS OF THE LTTE MOVEMENT IN SRI LANKA**

The LTTE movement fought the Sri Lankan government over the period roughly covering 1983-2009. The significance of the LTTE movement was their incorporation of the maritime domain into their armed resistance in contrast to irregulars showing a preference to remain within the landward domain.\textsuperscript{17} The LTTE decision to extend

\(\textsuperscript{15} \text{The USN Office of Naval Intelligence, “Iran’s Naval Forces”, p. 6.}\)

\(\textsuperscript{16} \text{During the Tanker War (1980-1989) the Iranians mined stretches of the Persian Gulf, which led to commercial and naval casualties and placed pressure upon the free flow of commercial traffic passing through the Persian Gulf.}\)

\(\textsuperscript{17} \text{Povlock, Paul A., “A Guerrilla War at Sea: The Sri Lankan Civil War”, Small Wars Journal, September 2011.}\)
their insurgency to sea by establishing the Sea Tigers was significant for two reasons. The first was the successes they achieved against the Sri Lanka Navy (SLN) as the SLN was unprepared for the off-shore shift of operations made by the Sea Tigers of the LTTE movement. The second interesting development was the way in which the SLN adjusted to successfully oppose the asymmetric threat deliberately employed by the seaward wing of the insurgent movement.

At the inception of the Sea Tigers, the SLN was a marginal service of the Sri Lankan armed forces and ill equipped to deal even with the basics of the threat posed by the Sea Tigers. The Sea Tigers managed to inflict significant damage upon the SLN – especially upon the Israeli-built Dvora fast attack craft of which they managed to sink about eight during skirmishes at sea. An ill-prepared and badly equipped SLN thus had to bear the brunt of the Sea Tiger attacks. The shock impact of the asymmetric tactics used by the Sea Tigers made the waters around Sri Lanka (particularly in the north) dangerous for the normal flow of maritime traffic and safe use of maritime resources. In effect, the LTTE insurgents successfully challenged the maritime jurisdiction of the Sri Lankan authorities over its own territorial waters for quite some time and seriously threatened the local good order at sea in its broader context.

The extent of the maritime shift by the LTTE movement becomes apparent in the following. The first element was their construction of a range of small fast boats with sufficient range and in significant numbers for suicide attacks through swarming tactics which the SLN initially could not counter. The second element was the acquisition of mother ships (civilian freight vessels) for supply purposes that remained on the open ocean and, when required, shipped crucial supplies under armed escort of the Sea Tigers to the LTTE through Sri Lankan territorial waters. Their training and indoctrination provided for suicide attacks at sea performed by the Black Sea Tigers (a special unit of the Sea Tiger forces), who with the use of swarming even managed to sink an off-shore patrol vessel of the SLN. In this way, the LTTE established insurgent sea control over a sector of the northern territorial waters of Sri Lanka through which they could run their supplies from the sea and from India in particular. Much of the success of the Sea Tigers was a result of the lack of readiness of the SLN in terms of equipment, training, doctrine and a general disequilibrium between a conventional navy for show and one having to fight a dangerous asymmetric threat at sea.

Adaptation became a crucial survival imperative for the SLN against the asymmetry of the Sea Tigers, and one of the ways they did this was by the development of the Small Boats Concept. This concept served to narrow down the asymmetry posed by the Sea Tigers. The SLN could thus increasingly expand its presence over

(19) Ibid., pp. 19-20.
(20) Ibid., p. 22.
the northern coastal waters of Sri Lanka to counter the relative freedom enjoyed by the Sea Tigers. The SLN eventually effected their own swarming upon the Sea Tiger threat by embarking upon a rapid small boat building programme. They also initiated a programme designed to bring larger naval craft into service to establish a reaction capability and a more permanent presence at sea with a better mix of vessels and specially trained crews. The mobilisation of SLN vessels and commercial ocean-going liners led to the eventual destruction of the LTTE mother ships on the high seas. These programmes in combination with a determination to bring in better equipment and well-trained crews and response units, enabled the SLN to systematically blunt the asymmetric threat and close down the freedom enjoyed by the Sea Tigers, which contributed to the eventual military defeat of the LTTE mother organisation on land in 2009.

Defeating the LTTE allowed the SLN to make a second shift from being a mission-orientated force tailored to fight an asymmetric threat to being a force which could play a wider role in its region, but now with significant experience in fighting at sea against an irregular opponent. It is now the intention of the SLN to turn the service into a more conventional navy that is capable of securing the maritime domain and assets of Sri Lanka. The SLN case demonstrates how a navy can adapt to fighting a particular asymmetric threat at sea, but with the negative consequence of later having to readjust its training, equipment and objectives back to that of a regular navy.

SEA PIRATES OFF THE HORN OF AFRICA
Whereas the IRGCN and the Sea Tigers constitute asymmetric threats in pursuit of a political agenda, the piracy threat off the Horn of Africa resides in the transnational criminal domain with a primarily financial incentive. Sea piracy off the Horn of Africa, however, is suspended between being a mere criminal activity weakening the Somali state and being linked to the al-Shabaab insurgent movement fighting the Somali government and African Union forces (AMISOM). The significance of the piracy threat derives primarily from its disruption of shipping in an international sea route used for distributing a major proportion of the strategic oil supplies to foreign economies. In response, a significant number of naval vessels are grouped into international or national task forces and now patrol this stretch of ocean. To their surprise, however, the naval contingents have discovered that stemming the piracy threat is complex and requires a significant effort at sea and on land by several parties in order to establish the required security conditions for the safe passage of maritime traffic.

(21) Ibid., p. 23.
The absence of good governance in the Horn of Africa region is a primary cause of the maritime threats in the region. In effect, all the elements of good order at sea are absent off the Somali coast. The solution, however, must include the maritime component and particularly so if it is taken into consideration that in Somalia the much acclaimed landward solution is entering its third decade with little cause for optimism. The effect of the bad order at sea off the Horn of Africa illustrates most prominently the threats at sea outlined by Till, Mullen and Band. This is what they warn against and see as the very state of affairs that must be prevented or rolled back though international naval cooperation as well as broader maritime cooperation.

In spite of the regression of good order at sea off the Horn of Africa, the cooperation to counter this escalation shows a rather extensive actor profile of countries and organisations cooperating to fight the piracy threat to shipping. As for naval forces, some estimates place the number as high as 43 naval vessels from several nationalities congregated in the Western Indian Ocean. The US, the UK, France, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand and Turkey, for example, contributed to Combined Task Force 151. The European Union Naval Force comprised contributions from the UK, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Greece, Malta, the Netherlands, Sweden, Luxembourg, Belgium, Ireland and Finland. Operation Ocean Shield included contributions by the US, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands Spain, Turkey and the UK. Independent contributions came from India, China, Russia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. This naval response did not run smoothly at all times. The arrived naval contingents were met by an opponent depicting the asymmetry inherent to the navy-pirate dichotomy. It was an asymmetry emerging from the nature of the opponent and not a deliberate strategy of the pirates to act in some asymmetric way to counter the naval forces. The naval intervention could in effect not quickly suppress the piracy threat due to different or ill-understood rights and rules of engagement regimes that constrained (and still do) naval operations, but not those of the pirates. The asymmetry thus functioned more in the form of rule constraints on one party and the freedom of no rules on the other.

The UN, in partnership with NGOs and industry, did much to muster the desired intergovernmental cooperation at sea, often across political fault lines, to be able to react against the piracy threat with its international maritime repercussions. By means of UN resolutions (particularly Resolutions 1816, 1838, 1846 and 1851 from 2008) the UN lowered the Somali sovereignty barrier in order to offer navies more leeway to engage the pirates and called for naval cooperation as well as assistance with prosecution. The counter-piracy patrols protected merchant shipping and convoys bringing food into Somalia by sea by apprehending pirates or preventing them from attacking shipping. Incidents gradually declined by about a third and the drop is being attributed to naval intervention and merchant shipping adopting best practices at sea for their own protection. The naval forces thus clamped down on

(24) Ibid., pp. 50-52.
(25) Ibid., pp. 55-56.
pirate threats with the help of the UN remoulding the ‘rules of engagement’ in order to narrow down the freedom of the pirate groups and allow aid and support from the sea to reach the land and flow to vulnerable populations. However, the piracy threat is not yet fully contained.

The physical apprehension of pirates had to be underpinned by appropriate legal arrangements in order to prosecute them in partner countries for their crimes committed at sea. Inappropriate domestic legislation and the risk of asylum demands if prosecution was not successful, as well as arduous arrangements to get suspected pirates to host countries and into court, further complicated the naval response. Good intentions thus floundered upon the ill-prepared institutions in the littoral countries of East Africa. An asymmetric threat posed by a criminal grouping made the tasks of the naval forces difficult. Pirates could shift their activities into the vast Indian Ocean and thus avoid the naval concentrations or make additional deployments too expensive.\(^{26}\) The anti-piracy response by the international community nonetheless demonstrated the strengths and shortcomings of international cooperation to establish local sea control and governance over a particular stretch of the ocean to counter a low-intensity asymmetric threat by a non-state actor. Cooperation by responding through numerous agencies slowly placed pressure upon the freedom of action that had been enjoyed by the pirates for some period of time and thus constrained this component of asymmetry. On the negative side the asymmetry of the piracy threat (not being constrained by international regimes, as opposed to the naval forces) allowed many to avoid prosecution and shift their operations to waters where the UN resolutions lost their impact, and it stretched the available naval forces to the maximum by increasing the costs to maintain naval vessels on station.

The slow progress to overcome the asymmetry of the piracy threat held several consequences. It endangered merchant shipping through delays, detours and costs. Food shipped by sea to Somali refugees also came under attack and so exacerbated an existing crisis on land. The asymmetry between the naval deployments and the piracy threat precluded a quick solution, which also had regional implications as countries like Kenya and Mauritius got drawn into the piracy dilemma through costly prosecution trials and in the form of attacks in their own waters as syndicates shifted their operations away from the growing naval presence. As a result, the pirates threatened a large stretch of the Western Indian Ocean down the East African coast. Since early 2011 the South African Development Community (SADC), for example, began to patrol its eastern waters in a sector roughly demarcated by Mozambique, Tanzania and Madagascar to prevent the insecurity spilling further south into SADC waters.\(^{27}\) This turn of events is motivated by a perceived need of SADC to prevent interference with shipping en route to or around southern Africa.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., pp. 56-58.

to secure upcoming energy infrastructure along the African south-east coast, to protect the dependence of SADC countries on a secured shipping route along the African south-east coast and to support African initiatives for better maritime security in African waters.28

CONCLUSION

Security on the oceans is a fast-growing debate as the threat spectrum as well as the responses to maritime insecurity is fast assuming its rightful position alongside landward security. Although it is not an argument independent of time, some analysts emphasise the importance of securing the oceans in a way that points to the need to uphold good order at sea. Although the threats may seem diffuse, this brief exemplified three particular asymmetric threats to maritime security that in effect required naval responses. The IRGCN case portrays a deliberate infusion of asymmetry into any confrontation with an opposing navy in the Persian Gulf. By way of action, the IRGCN already demonstrated its willingness and capability to interfere with shipping passing through and thus holds an asymmetric threat recognised by modern navies. In the Northern Indian Ocean the case of Sri Lanka reflects how an insurgent movement turned to off-shore operations as well and by way of asymmetric tactics not only kept the SLN at bay for a significant period of time, but also created insecurity in the territorial waters of Sri Lanka for more than two decades. It took a deliberate naval effort to break the stranglehold of the Sea Tigers, in spite of them being the weaker opponent. The case of Somalia shifts the asymmetric threat even further to the fringes of irregular dangers that threaten the good order at sea by its depiction of the clash between criminal actors and naval forces. A stark disequilibrium between the ‘enemy’ and the naval response blunted the expected quick impact of the anti-piracy campaign. The pirates acted as civilians, not guerrillas or formal military opponents, and operated increasingly outside the rules that made the naval forces appear less efficient, but they nonetheless managed to survive in spite of the considerable international naval deployments. Although the international reaction to the UN calls upon the international community to respond to the piracy threat was encouraging in the light of what Till and Mullen proposes, the piracy threat managed to avoid the potentially deadly impact of the combined naval operations. In conclusion, all three cases show how asymmetric threats find their way into the maritime threat domain along conventional, irregular and criminal lines with each holding its own threat repertoire to a naval reply by governments.

(28) Ibid.