



Exercise Deep Sabre

Customs was involved in a 13-nation exercise in south-east Asia - the first held in the region under a global initiative to contain the illegal export of weapons technology. Among the Australian Customs contingent taking part was Jason Ross from the Northern Territory:

Photo: Brian Heslehurst

Australia supported the proliferation security initiative (PSI) exercise Deep Sabre by providing an Australian Customs Vessel (ACV) *Hervey Bay*, with a crew of 12, as well as an enforcement boarding and search team of six officers.

The enforcement team, of which I was a member, was deployed to assist in boarding suspect vessels on the high seas and search for chemical weapon-related materials.

In all, Exercise Deep Sabre involved 2000 military, coast guard and customs personnel, 10 vessels and six maritime patrol aircraft.

The participants were the host country, Singapore, and Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Russia and the US. Brunei, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Vietnam were present as observers at the invitation of Singapore.

The PSI was established in May 2003 with the aim of impeding the international flow of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery systems.

The exercise involved the illegal movement of precursor chemical weapons materials via commercial vessels in the South China Sea.

The *Hervey Bay* sailed from Darwin to participate in the exercise, calling in at Benoa in Indonesia for fuel and rest stops to and from Singapore. This was the first time an ACV has participated in this type of exercise in a foreign country.

The brief scenario underlying this exercise was as follows: Initial intelligence from the US indicated that a possible illegal shipment of dual-use chemicals was being sent from a port in north-east Asia to Europe. The US informed its partners and requested their assistance on further information on the shipment.

Japanese authorities revealed that shipments fitting the profile left its ports on several ships during the stated period and was expected to transit from the East China Sea through the Straits of Malacca. The shipment was believed to be dimethyl methylphosphonate (DMMP), a precursor for the manufacture of nerve gas.



Japan and the US requested that regional PSI partners assist in locating and tracking the suspected vessels. Some Japanese and US assets in the East and South China Sea were tasked to locate the vessels. Naval and air assets from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the UK that had just completed an exercise were also tasked to locate the vessels.

A Combined Coordination Centre (CCC) was set up in Singapore to co-ordinate the surveillance effort of the maritime and air assets to detect, locate and track suspicious vessels in the South China Sea. Interdiction and boarding of contacts of interest at sea was to be carried out.

The vessel *Avatar* was boarded by Singapore defence forces that secured the vessel and searched for suspicious cargo. A combined Australian Customs and Japanese Coastguard boarding party followed. They combined to search for a missing crew member that had not been mustered. Additionally bridge security was passed to this combined group who also undertook examination of the ship's documents.

At the completion of the boarding and storming phase, units returned to their vessels and returned to Singapore. A final contact of interest was escorted into Singapore port where an alongside search was carried out by a Singapore inter-agency force. Once the suspect cargo was located and identified, civilian enforcement authorities, including Customs, detained it. The exercise provided a great opportunity to work with officers from other regions and successfully demonstrated that Customs has the capability to board, secure and search vessels under way.

Australian Customs ability to effectively deploy a vessel to a neighbouring country to assist in this PSI exercise showed it has the capability to support regional operations.