

Terrorism and cyber-crime not the most pressing marine risks, says Wilkes



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In the field of maritime security, although terrorism and cyber-crime grab the headlines, they are not “the nearest crocodile to the canoe”, according to James Wilkes, co-founder and Managing Director of Gray Page, a specialist advisory and consulting group that solves problems around the world for companies and organizations in shipping, insurance and international trade.

In a recent article for Navigate Response (link below) Wilkes said that the emphasis placed on terrorist and cyber-threats was counter-productive. “It distorts our perception of security risk. By focusing attention on extreme and, by definition, relatively unlikely events, commonly-prevailing problems are glossed-over and left unaddressed”.



He noted that there have been only five validated terrorist attacks against merchant ships since 2001, the deadliest of which was the 2004 attack on the Superferry 14, off the Philippines, which killed 116 people. Verifiable cyber-attacks against ships had been even rarer. A survey published last year by IHS Fairplay in association with BIMCO about cyber-attacks on shipping revealed that of the ‘attacks’ claimed by the 300 or so respondents, only 4 % had some impact on the functionality of shipborne systems. It also seemed likely that some, if not most of the ‘attacks’ were ‘user error’;

as in the inadvertent downloading of a virus from the internet or ported from a USB stick.

Wilkes said that the majority of bulk cargo thefts that took place each year were from land-based storage facilities and without the sophistication of hacking a single computer. Although terrorism and cyber-crime are serious issues Wilkes said that the nearest crocodile to the canoe was piracy — and violence against seafarers in particular, despite an improvement in the statistics during 2016.

Wilkes noted that, according to the ICC-IMB, there were 191 incidents of piracy and armed robbery on the world’s seas in 2016, including 15 incidents where pirates kidnapped a total of 62 seamen for ransom. Instability on land created the permissive environment for criminality to

succeed at sea. “Without a resolution to conflict and corruption ashore, the threat of piracy will not be extinguished”, said Wilkes. This meant that dealing with the threat was a matter for governments, their militaries and law enforcement agencies. However, he concluded that the vulnerability of ships and their crews to criminal threats was also unquestionably a matter for shipowners, operators and managers, and the broader shipping community.

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