

The case of the disappearing ship

Stephen Askins, of Ince & Co considers the 'known unknowns' of the disappearing ship, the *Arctic Sea*

Mr Runfeld's infamous comments about the 'known unknowns' seem perfect to sum up the story of the *Arctic Sea* which has captured the imagination of the mainstream media in the past weeks.

It now seems certain that the vessel was hijacked and that the crew has suffered a traumatic ordeal. There is nothing romantic about modern piracy and we should continue to spare a thought for those who suffer it first hand.

The hijackers of the *Arctic Sea* are already back in Moscow and have been charged. Having seen news footage of the hijackers travel arrangements one can assume the Russian government's view on compassion differs from that of the Scottish executive.

Significantly, we do seem to have had the first hijacking of a vessel in European waters since the *City of Poros* back in 1988 when Abu Nidal and not Bin Laden was the name on everyone's lips.

Thankfully, the hijack of the *Arctic Sea* was resolved quickly without harm to the crew. Questions are still being asked and, as our enduring fascination with the *Mary Celeste* shows, our love of a good maritime mystery is undiminished.

The Swedish government has issued a warning to vessels in the Baltic and commentators have the ammunition for the argument that the Somali model of hijacking may be spreading. However, the Somali pirates are successful because they can take refuge in a lawless state. Drifting about off Cape Verde with a vague rumour of a ransom demand suggests a lack of a clear exit strategy.

The case has also thrown up the question of how easy it is for a ship to disappear. The *Salem* and *Petro Ranger* are given as precedents of stolen ships with new identities. Those ships were stolen to allow the theft of valuable cargo but here there was a relatively low value timber cargo on board.

What is not in doubt is that the last known position detected by the automatic identification system (AIS) coverage in the English Channel showed the vessel to be halfway through the westbound corridor of the traffic separation scheme off Brest. To then be found off Cape Verde some days later meant the vessel must have continued south but was allegedly untraceable.

The Maltese authorities have since said the vessel was being tracked – an assertion probably supported by the speed with which the vessel was found. The flurry of activity by the Russian Navy was also impressive and, with no suggestion of help from other European navies, there was very much a feeling of 'We've got this one thanks'.

A response, say the conspirators, more in tune with the loss of the *Khursk*. The Russians are saying that their response was a direct result to a threat to Russian seamen and have dismissed suggestions that the ship had missiles hidden below deck as 'ridiculous'. The crew as a priority is the right one and refreshing to see.

If the vessel really had disappeared, we must assume the AIS was off. AIS is limited, depends on VHF coverage and is therefore restricted to about 50 nautical miles (nm) from land-based stations. It can also be picked up by other ships. Moreover, the vessel cannot have had a system allowing for long range identification and tracking (LRIT).

Although 1 July 2009 is a key date for its implementation, the system is being phased in across old tonnage as radio certificates become subject to renewal. LRIT utilises the Inmarsat system allowing an update four times a day to be accessed by coastal states on ships either declared as going to that state or up to 1000 nm offshore.

Both systems are mandated under SOLAS and clearly could have some use in search

and rescue situations. But they were brought into being for their role in maritime security pushed for by the US. LRIT depends on information transmitted via a satellite to a data hub, either a national or regional data centre for dissemination for a fee to those states that want it.

The EU has a regional hub and Russia, for example, has a national one. It is not information available commercially and importantly there is no cost to the individual shipowner.

This technology is moving quickly and AIS has also taken to the skies with a company, Comdev, launching an 8 kg nanosatellite that orbits the earth every 90 minutes some 630 km high collecting AIS data from ships which would otherwise be 'invisible'. It links in with existing land stations and may render LRIT or parts of it superfluous. More satellites are expected.

Perhaps the *Arctic Sea* was tracked down the English Channel but there is a suspicion that the French and UK authorities were not aware that it was hijacked. The security implications of that are serious. It mirrors the argument here in the UK on ID cards and the idea that they can in themselves prevent terrorism. Just because you know the name of the ship, its course and cargo, you cannot know its intentions. A ship does not have to be invisible to be a threat. ■

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