

on speed alone to escape being boarded.

One shipping official close to the situation said the whole affair is extremely convoluted because of the mixture of anti-smuggling operations and criminal acts involved. Of the official Chinese anti-smuggling efforts, he said: "Their methods are crude and certainly not acceptable in the international arena." But he added that Chinese officials were responding to more private approaches from Hong Kong shipping and law-enforcement organisations.

Hong Kong is a major centre for China-bound smuggling. Speedboats have long been used to smuggle cigarettes, TV sets, and other high-value items into the mainland. Ships and barges have also been taking containers stuffed with stolen cars.

Cross-border theft last year reached the

stage where 14 luxury motor-yachts worth about HK\$46 million (US\$5.9 million) were stolen from Hong Kong. One of them was seen by its owner in December being used as a high-speed ferry in Guangdong province. It was among five yachts returned to Hong Kong in late May after talks between retiring Hong Kong police chief Li Kwaha and Chinese police officials. Li was also responsible for setting up the return of some of the 6,000 cars stolen from Hong Kong and taken to China in the past three years. But only about 60 cars have made the return trip, all of them heavily damaged.

Guangdong officials have helped to cut the market for such stolen vehicles by banning registration of

right-hand-drive vehicles and arresting alleged smugglers. The spate of car thefts was reduced — to the extent that soaring insurance rates were cut in the case of Mercedes cars, one of the leading brands chosen by the thieves.

In the meantime, Chinese patrol craft discovered by the Royal Navy within Hong Kong waters at night have been known to play highly dangerous games of "chicken" while returning to their own side of the border. In one such incident, recorded by the Royal Navy with a thermal-imaging camera, as the Chinese patrol boat swept past the British ship one of its crew was seen relieving himself over the stern. No one knows whether the symbolism was intended. ■ Michael Westlake

Abrupt Change

By Charles Smith in Tokyo



It may have been a case of botched communications, or China may have changed its policy. Either way, say Japanese officials, the problem of Chinese vessels interfering with international shipping in the East China Sea seems to have disappeared as abruptly as it began.

Japan counted 78 cases of Japanese and foreign vessels being boarded or shot at by Chinese ships between March 1991 and June 1993, only three of which were ever acknowledged by China.

Japanese Maritime Safety Agency (MSA) officials say that most of the incidents took the form of forced inspections, rather than piracy. "The Chinese would board a vessel and ask to see the ship's documents, but would not normally take money or goods," an official said. "They would fire warning shots before boarding, but sometimes the Chinese sailors were armed only with swords."

Japan issued numerous protests to China about the incidents through its Beijing embassy, but the Chinese routinely disclaimed knowledge of them. A breakthrough occurred during a February 1993 visit to Tokyo by Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, when Japan proposed that coastguard officials from the two countries should meet to discuss shipping problems in the East China Sea.

The Chinese agreed on condition that the meetings be kept informal. "We didn't issue any documents after the June meeting," said Yukinobu Tomonaga, a senior MSA official, "but we ar-

ranged to establish a hot line to deal with any future incidents."

Whether this brought very swift action by Beijing, or whether the threat of Russian warships not far away did the trick, the situation changed abruptly. Since July last year, only one

boarding incident has been reported to the MSA, which is Japan's coastguard agency.

But were the boardings intended to implement offshore sovereignty? The Japanese Foreign Ministry says it was "concerned" when China published a law in February 1992 which included the Senkaku island group north of Taiwan in China's territory. Before the law was published, Beijing and Tokyo had agreed to freeze a long-standing dispute over the Senkakus, and instead explore ways of jointly developing oil reserves in the surrounding region.

Officials at the Foreign Ministry are uncertain why the problem disappeared so suddenly, but they no longer believe that the incidents were part of a Chinese strategy for extending sovereignty over the international waters of the East China Sea. "The Chinese have a mass of local agencies patrolling coastal waters, not all of which are well informed or well disciplined" said an official.

The Foreign Ministry believes that ships belonging to these agencies may have been involved in many of the boarding incidents.

Hisahiko Ikazaki, a former senior Foreign Ministry official who now advises



China's Qian: breakthrough on shipping problems.

the Hakuodo advertising agency, notes that China, in any case, has no reason to try to settle the Senkaku island dispute at present. "For a power which expects to gain strength in future it's always best to leave a territorial dispute open," he told the REVIEW.

"China doesn't have any reason to destabilise relations with Japan at present," another Japanese diplomat commented. And though some of the incidents occurred not far from the Senkaku islands, he added: "On our side, we see no connection between the territorial law and the ship-boarding incidents."

"The Foreign Ministry issued a protest over the law, but now the authorities say they think it was issued for purely domestic reasons," said an official.

Tomonaga, the MSA official, said that China now appears to be doing its utmost to prevent local mafia from faking the markings of vessels to justify assaults on foreign shipping. "They've changed their uniforms and started writing the names of ships employed by government agencies in a new, intricate style that the mafia can't imitate," he said.

In return, China has asked Japan to stop smugglers from Singapore and Hong Kong using some of the smaller ports in the Okinawa island group south of Japan's main islands for transshipping cigarettes. "We don't have any laws for doing this," said Tomonaga, "but we've issued 'guidance' to handling agents on the islands to stop accepting the cargoes." ■