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SOMALIA ONE YEAR ON : Making the Anti-Piracy Drive More Effective

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The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) voted unanimously on 30 November 2009 to extend the mandate for member countries to conduct anti-piracy operations off Somalia. A review is needed to boost the effectiveness of the multi-national effort.

NAVAL SHIPS from as many as 20 countries have been deployed in anti-piracy patrols off Somalia for the last one year. Despite this presence and the measures taken till now, the International Maritime Bureau reported that 214 vessels were attacked resulting in 47 hijackings in 2009, compared to 111 ships attacked in 2008.

Effects of Increasing Piracy

The Somali pirates have been proving to be tactically ingenious. After the arrival of warships in the Gulf of Aden, the pirates have extended their hunting ground up to 800 nautical miles into the Indian Ocean. This means that virtually any vessel sailing between Europe and East Africa or the Persian Gulf/South Asia, is potentially at risk of attack. At risk are not only the vessels sailing through the Suez Canal, but also those that go via the Cape of Good Hope.

In the meantime, oil transportation costs are beginning to go up on account of increased insurance cover of up to US\$1 million for a medium-sized tanker, as well as due to re-routing of vessels to avoid the Somali coast. The disruption caused to the shipping industry by piracy is dramatic, but the outcome in human terms is also considerable. In 2008, Somali pirates held 815 crew members hostage. By September 2009, a further 485 had been captured.

Making Anti-Piracy Efforts More Effective

Unified Response for Optimum Utilisation of Resources: Naval ships from a large number of countries and groupings are deployed in anti-piracy patrols in the area. These include at least 20 countries and represent a wide variety of political, economic and individual interests, signifying the absolute necessity of weeding out the piracy menace. There is, therefore, definitely a common meeting ground

and purpose, which is also mandated by the UNSC resolution.

However, all ships are not deployed as a UN Peace Keeping Force (UNPKF) under a unified command as they ought to be for centralised coordination and optimum utilisation of scarce resources over vast ocean areas. The existing groupings include the US-led CTF 151, the EU Naval Task Force and the NATO Force. The remaining ships from China, India, Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia etc, operate independently. This arrangement naturally causes duplication of effort/resources amongst other lacunae.

The present efforts by the US Navy to achieve some kind of overall coordination, or rather de-confliction, in the form of monthly “Shared Awareness and De-Confliction” meetings at Bahrain, are naturally inadequate. What is required is a unified command structure and centralised coordination, as for land-based UNPK missions, which have been ongoing in almost all parts of the world. Such an arrangement would be acceptable even to countries which are presently deploying their navies independently.

Coastal Operations: The UNSC’s specific mandate authorises naval ships deployed for anti-piracy patrols to “enter the territorial waters and undertake all necessary measures that are appropriate in Somalia”. It would be prudent to focus the available effort on the Somali coastal areas so as to target the pirates while they are breaking out to sea. This will limit the sea area to be kept under surveillance. The available air and satellite surveillance effort could be best utilised for this purpose.

In addition, as outlined in a Russian proposal, another element of the UNPKF could carry out land operations in these coastal areas, in coordination with the naval element, so as to eradicate the bases/hide-outs of the pirates ashore. This would be in line with the recent UNSC call for “more crucial and robust ways” to deal with the pirates. It is understood that some such action may be forthcoming because of the recent reported build-up in Djibouti of Special Forces from a variety of countries.

Measures by Merchant Vessels/ Companies/ Owners: It is reported that at least 25 per cent of the merchant vessels do not follow the guidelines issued by the International Maritime Organisation, making them more vulnerable to hijacking. States must pressurise companies to conform to the guidelines. In addition, it is high time that ship owners/companies adopted some uniform “piracy hardening” measures on board ships such as crew training, visual/radar look-out for early warning, safety nets, higher speeds / manoeuvres, fire hoses as water cannons and other access denial measures which would be certainly cost effective.

The desirability and ethics of payment of ransom amounts by ship owners is also being debated as it is one of the major factors contributing to the increase in incidents of piracy. With the unified anti-piracy operation under UN mandate hopefully coming about in the near future, there should also be a uniform, deliberate response to demands of ransom, and not the individual, panic-ridden reaction by ship owners seen today.

Legal Framework: The legal framework for efficient, credible and timely trials ashore of arrested piracy suspects needs to be worked out by the UN and enunciated. This needs to be done on priority so that the naval ships on patrol are not saddled with the additional burden of maintaining a large number of arrested pirates on board, thereby bringing down their effectiveness in their primary mission.

The world community is just about coming to grips with the recent economic downturn. It is essential to ensure that the menace of piracy does not get out of proportion and start affecting the global economic system adversely. Equally important would be to restore the “freedom of navigation and safety at sea” principles cherished by the world at large.

All nation states must come together under the UN umbrella and pool in available resources jointly, including for some innovative and robust measures, to make the ongoing multi-national anti-piracy efforts more effective.

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