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Maritime Piracy: A Chronic but Manageable Threat

Are fragile states and bad governance responsible for maritime piracy? On the contrary, argues Bridget Coggins. Pirates also benefit from stable governments that provide easy access to corrupt officials and a steady stream of high value targets.

By Bridget Coggins for ISN

Recent years have seen a dramatic reduction in maritime piracy. According to the International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Center, Somali pirates attacked 236 ships in 2011. By the end of 2013, that number had dropped to 15. Earlier in the 2000s, international cooperation produced similarly impressive results in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. Is it possible that these trends anticipate a future where the threat of piracy could be eliminated? For a number of reasons, piracy is unlikely to disappear. Still, the threat is manageable and, given the right mix of political will and effective counter-piracy strategies, most ships can be safe an overwhelming majority of the time.

Why can't piracy be eliminated?

The nature of the phenomenon that we currently consider 'maritime piracy' makes it unlikely that the practice can be stopped entirely. For most, the term 'piracy' conjures images of kidnapping and hijacking on the high seas, but this type of piracy is only one of a number of incident types catalogued as "maritime piracy and armed robbery against ships" by the International Maritime Organization. The definition now in common use is much broader and includes attacks within a country's territorial waters and those that occur while a ship is in port. The traditional, narrow definition of maritime piracy includes only those attacks against vessels outside of the territorial waters of any country.

If the broader definition of piracy is employed, there is little chance that piracy can be eliminated – and doing so would probably not be worth the time or effort that it would require. Many of these piracy incidents are petty thefts of the crew's personal items or the ship's cargo. This "piracy" problem is not so much an international scourge as it is domestic crime. Armed robbery, whether at sea or on land, is unlikely to be eradicated.

If we only consider attacks fitting the narrower definition, there are fewer attacks to deter and defend against but the task of doing so is more complicated because the attacks are more sophisticated and resemble organized crime. Additionally, conflicts over sovereignty and responsibility often arise between states attempting to counter threats that cross international boundaries. So called

non-traditional threats like piracy cannot be resolved without the cooperation of many countries – including the home governments of the perpetrators and of the victims. The free passage of people and goods at sea is essential to the routine functioning of the global economy and international affairs. Yet the basic will, resources, and cooperation between countries required to thwart these attacks are often lacking.

One of the most significant obstacles to countering piracy is the short attention span of the international community and its tendency to quickly divert funds to new, "more pressing" problems. In the Somali case, large sums of money and resources have been dedicated to countering piracy. For example, the new Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF), established in 2010, receives much of its funding from the United Arab Emirates and its new prison was built by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). If those resources were withdrawn, the Puntland regional government would have trouble maintaining the force. Nevertheless, some of the international community's attention has already shifted away from the Gulf of Aden toward the new hot spot in West Africa and the Gulf of Guinea.

It can also be difficult to convince governments to take serious measures to counter piracy on land. Occasionally, this is because the government or security apparatus has been corrupted or co-opted by a pirate or organized crime network, but it is also because piracy's victims are typically outsiders who lack local advocates. As piracy mostly originates in weak states, it is typically only one of a number of competing security priorities and combating it has few palpable positive effects for local authorities. The interaction of victim countries' desires to effectively counter piracy and perpetrator countries' perceived indifference often undermines international cooperation as victim governments' policies become more assertive and perpetrator governments become increasingly wary of meddling in their internal affairs.

When and why does piracy decline?

Although the precise reasons for piracy's recent decline off of the coast of Somalia are difficult to identify because so many counter-piracy tactics were adopted at once, there is little doubt that increased naval patrols have had a deterrent effect. Far fewer attacks are even attempted in the Gulf of Aden today than before. Increased awareness and training have also helped to thwart attacks and increase crew safety. Changing practices within the shipping industry, including simple and relatively low-cost changes like the use of secure routes, training for emergencies and instruction in evasive maneuvers have worked. As have the provision of a safe room onboard and the addition of lookouts on deck. Some of the more controversial measures, like the use of armed private security contractors, have received a great deal of publicity and attention, but there is only anecdotal evidence that they more effectively or efficiently protect ships.

In regions where pirate activity exists, there is reason to believe that uneven surveillance or gaps in counter-piracy operations shift the geographic locations of pirate bases and attacks. Some have likened counter-piracy's effects in the Gulf of Aden to an inflating balloon that forces Somali pirates to attempt attacks farther and farther out into the Indian Ocean in order to evade capture. Others argue that the pattern of decline resembles "whack-a-mole," implying that new attacks will occur wherever surveillance is lax and that uninterrupted vigilance is required.

Where we have seen maritime piracy decline most precipitously, it has been the result of the concerted multilateral efforts of local governments, victim governments, and the international shipping community.

Why don't fewer attacks portend piracy's end?

Even if counter-piracy strategies continue to prove effective, there are always areas where piracy might emerge (or reemerge). Research has improved our understanding of the states with important risk factors for the development of particular types of piracy, but we cannot yet pinpoint where it will begin because its proximate causes are so distinct.

Scholarship on piracy is generating increasingly accurate estimates of the conditions conducive to maritime piracy. For example, early suspicions that piracy was related to failed states have been replaced by more nuanced studies like those by myself, Justin Hastings, Olaf de Groot, Anja Shortland, and Sarah Percy which outline the conditions under which piracy, in its various forms, is likely to emerge. Professor Hastings' work suggests that Somali piracy is unlikely to transform into the more sophisticated form of piracy found in Southeast Asia. Others of us maintain that piracy in general - and Somali piracy in particular - is enabled by a certain degree of functional governance on land. The weakest states are typically unable to support a thriving pirate industry, and pirates in the Puntland region benefitted from a relatively stable government, corruptible officials and steady stream of high value targets through the Gulf of Aden that could not easily be rerouted elsewhere. Despite these important findings, we are not sure why piracy flourished in Somalia, but not across the Gulf of Aden in Yemen, where most of the same risk factors are present. Nor can we explain why most insurgencies have not adopted maritime piracy like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) has in Nigeria.

In sum, although recent counter-piracy strategies have been effective, if difficult to implement and sustain, piracy is likely to continue as a persistent, low-level threat in years to come.

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