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Somali Piracy: Gone for Good?

What's behind the recent decline in maritime piracy attacks off the Horn of Africa? Sonia Rothwell believes that military operations on land and at sea are starting to have the desired effect, as are more controversial measures developed by private companies.

By Sonia Rothwell for ISN

Following its peak between 2005 and 2011, maritime piracy off the Horn of Africa now appears to be abating. The efforts of 40 countries, numerous coalitions and the controversial adoption by some ships of armed guards have contributed to the gradual decrease of both successful and attempted hijackings. But this suggests a far simpler solution to the threat than is the reality. What, for example, are the reasons behind the fall? And with the rise in instances of piracy and robbery in the Gulf of Guinea, West Africa, has the threat simply moved elsewhere?

Money to be Made

Despite the fact that piracy around the Horn of Africa compromises one of the world's busiest trade routes, the Gulf of Aden, very few studies have attempted to estimate its impact on the global economy. [A recently-released report](#) by the World Bank seeks to change that. According to its figures, Somali piracy cost the global economy an estimated \$18bn for the year 2010. The report also notes "that piracy imposes a distortion on trade that has a high absolute cost. When the shortest shipping route between two countries is through piracy-infected waters, the additional cost of trade between them is equivalent to an increase of 0.75 to 1.49 percentage points (with a mean estimate of about 1.1) in total ad valorem trade costs."

But for a poor region largely devoid of structure beyond clan networks, jobs and steady income, the business model for piracy is an attractive one. Somali pirate attacks are long-term investments in that the crews and their backers are prepared to hold out for many months for ransom demands to be met. The outlay is relatively inexpensive [at around \\$80,000](#) but the ransoms can be lucrative (although payments to financial backers and to communities who tolerate pirate activity can significantly eat into profits, meaning the pirate foot-soldiers may not actually make much money from the risks they take). From such a simple premise, much money has been made. Again, the recent World Bank report estimates that the average ransom in 2011 and 2012 was \$4.9m.

Sea-based solutions

Given such attractive rewards, what are the factors that have contributed to the apparent downturn in fortunes for Somalia's pirate corporations, which have until now shown an impressive ability to adapt

their modus operandi? The most visible explanation for the drop in attacks is the increase in international military interest in the region, with the European Union (EU) and NATO among organizations contributing resources to patrolling the vast area of sea in which the pirates operate. Other states, such as China, have also mounted their own operations. Changes in management practices onboard have also helped: boats have better lookouts, simple deterrents such as water hoses and razor wire have been applied and some ships have been equipped with safe rooms (known as citadels) so that crews have somewhere to hide if their vessel is attacked.

The other more controversial move which has been taken by ship-owners is to deploy teams of armed guards on boats. Initial successes prompted the private maritime security industry to stand by the slogan "No ship with armed guards has been hijacked". However, their involvement in counter-piracy operations has raised important questions about states' responsibility for mariners' safety as well as the legal implications of boats carrying arms. Concerns also exist that private security companies have effectively turned vessels into floating armories that may even have the potential to escalate levels of violence.

Nevertheless, the private sector continues to take the fight to the pirates. Glencore, the Swiss-based commodities corporation, has launched its own spin-off private maritime security force, [Typhon](#), to protect the shipment of commodities like cocoa and oil. However, the company is keen to reject any comparisons with the British East India Company.

Land-based answers

But seaborne measures are not the only tactics which have been applied to stem the number of attacks. Instability on the mainland – Somali piracy, after all, was born in the semi-autonomous state of Puntland – has helped create an ideal environment for criminal activity to thrive. Yet, the political climate in the Horn of Africa is slowly changing. While the writ of Somalia's president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud barely extends beyond Mogadishu, the Islamist insurgent group al-Shabab's grip over large swathes of the country continues to [come under increased pressure](#). In 2011, Kenyan troops carried out an incursion into the south of Somalia following a spate of kidnappings of foreigners near the border, apparently by Somali gangs. Around 18,000 African Union troops are also in the country to help contain unrest.

Since it became a significant problem, analysts have routinely said that the solution to Somali piracy is rooted on land. The slow political change currently taking place needs practical if not financial support from richer nations if it is to grow. Problems with accountability in such a lawless state, however, make it difficult to know for certain whether money is being spent in the right areas or is simply ending up in the hands of warlords. But there have been other developments which may have contributed to the drop in attacks (for the latest figures, go to the [International Maritime Bureau's website](#)).

The development of the apparently UAE-funded Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF) in 2010 to counteract piracy has also been controversial. It is the latest incarnation of a coastguard-type operation charged with reducing the number of pirate attacks. The force is recruited locally but training has been provided by private security firms. It carried out a sweep of pirate villages in 2012 which may have had an impact on the amount of attacks which could be launched. A superficial comparison may be made with the formerly entrenched problem of piracy in the Straits of Malacca. Aceh province, where it is believed many pirates were based, was badly hit by the 2004 tsunami, wiping out many coastal villages. Following the disaster, there was a peace deal between the Free Aceh Movement [who had been fighting for 26 years](#) and the Indonesian government.

Clearly, this is an imperfect comparison. Yet it nevertheless illustrates how stability on land and the

removal of pirate gangs are mutually important if this type of criminal activity is to be curtailed. Anecdotally, it also seems that pirates in some areas have made themselves unpopular with the local communities on whose support they depend. Faux pas such as using their newly acquired wealth to take the wives or girlfriends of others have proved unpopular according to one Somali journalist. If this is broadly true, then the pirates have breached Mao Tse Tung's advice that "the guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea" thereby working with, and not against, the environment and those within it.

Has Piracy "gone West?"

But if Somalia's piracy problem has died down somewhat (and there is no guarantee the lull is permanent), piracy on the opposite side of the continent, in the Gulf of Guinea, is rising. Is there a link? In an interview with the author, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) said the two business models for operations are different; the attacks in the Gulf of Guinea are more often robberies where equipment and possessions are taken, or bunkering operations where oil is siphoned from tankers and sold off elsewhere. There is also a difference onshore with littoral states such as Nigeria having functioning governments, unlike in Somalia, although that does suggest that law and order is not being adequately maintained. Many of the robberies in the Gulf of Guinea take place within the sovereign waters of the littoral states, meaning that technically they do not count as piracy. And while there is growing support for regional cooperation to bring the problem [under control](#), there is also recognition that legal frameworks are necessary for states to be able to progress on the issue. Recently, for example, a Nigerian naval commander complained that the country lacks the legal frameworks to effectively [tackle pirate attacks](#).

Safeguarding Progress Made

If piracy in the waters around the Horn of Africa is to be contained, current initiatives such as EU Navfor's [Operation Atalanta](#) need to be maintained. However, as military budgets are increasingly tightened in the West, it seems increasingly likely that there will have to be a good business case for patrols to be continued. The use of private contractors must also be carefully monitored such is the nervousness about the possible accidental killing of an innocent sailor and the consequences that this and other errors may have on the industry. It also appears that the combination of factors outlined above plus, arguably, jail terms for those who are actually convicted for this notoriously tricky offence to prosecute, have all helped bring down the number of attacks and hijackings. But the pirates have proved on numerous occasions that they are resilient and adaptable. Consequently, the international community cannot afford to fall asleep on its watch if the problem is not to return.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Calming Troubled Waters: Global and Regional Strategies for Countering Piracy](#)

[Managing the Global Response to Maritime Piracy](#)

[Piracy at Sea: Overview and Policy Responses](#)

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