

Piracy off Somalia 2012: Gamechanger ATALANTA and PCAST

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IMB-Statistics

IMB statistics show a significant drop-down in pirate activity in 2012 compared to 2011: 75 attacks (237 in 2011) resulting in 14 hijacks (28 in 2011). Numbers become even more impressive after dividing 2012 in its two halves: 60 attacks and 12 hijacks in the first six months and only 15 attacks and 2 hijacks in the second six month period. But it's too early for "all-clear-signal" yet. At least some pirate gangs show they are highly professional and still determined to get their catch – as can be seen by 2012 attack-hijack ratio of 5.4/1 compared with 8.5/1 in 2011.

Gamechanger EU-NavFor ATALANTA

Two factors combined made new conditions: EU-NavFor ATALANTA and Privately Contracted Armed Security Teams (PCAST) onboard merchant ships. Without one of them the outcomes would have been worse. Without naval forces pirate gangs possibly would have chosen to join in an arms race amending their usually used AK-47 and RPG-7 with some equipment providing more firepower to overwhelm PCASTs. Without PCASTs pirate gangs would have achieved a clearly better attack-hijack-ratio. Until the end of 2012 no ship guarded by PCAST was boarded.

The dropdown in numbers of attacks proves the efficiency of EU-NavFor ATALANTA's new strategy practiced since May 2012. First the Royal Netherlands Navy proved effectiveness of a close-in-blockade of pirate strongholds combined with some "cutting-out-expeditions" – resembling historical experience from the age of sail – in autumn 2011 with their "OP Ketting". In spring 2012 EU decided to amend mandate ATALANTA to fight pirate logistics and equipment on land. Since May 2012 EU-NavFor ATALANTA began to destroy skiffs and dhows equipped with pirate paraphernalia and ready to put to sea on the beach. German naval assets took part in this operation, mandated by German federal parliament. One could argue that even more had to be done, perhaps to catch leading pirates or destroy pirate home towns. But even these minor strikes against pirate equipment proved to have a devastating effect on the gangs' financing and activities. Until 2011 "investments" in piracy operations guaranteed extremely high revenues. But with destroyed boats and equipment most investments were lost – preventing „investors“ from spending any more money. So navies proved to be more efficient than hunting for pirates' money transfers after receiving their million dollar ransoms. This deterrence by close-in-blockade even convinces pirates not to spend parts of their last ransoms in new pirate operations.

Since pirates boosted local economy with their ransom dollars they were not only respected but considered as people's heroes. In late 2012 first hints indicated that pirate gangs are beginning to lose their backing even in their strongholds as Garacad, were Puntland security forces freed hijacked MV ICEBERG I in December 2012.

EU-NavFor ATALANTA's switch in strategy proved not only efficient in suppressing pirate activities. It proves to be much more efficient than only using limited naval and air assets for sea surveillance in the vast areas of Indian Ocean.

Gamechanger PCAST

More and more shipowners rely on PCAST. And even if there are some objections from a soldiers or lawyers point of view PCAST proved to be very helpful. Experience shows that IMOs Best Management Practices (BMP) provide a certain level of defence against pirate attack – but these measures have limited effects and can be overwhelmed by determined attackers. No ship guarded by PCAST was ever boarded by pirates.

Improved situational awareness of skippers and intensified exchange of information on attacks and suspicious sightings prevent pirates from using surprise to get a catch. Information exchange in addition helps to hunt down pirates, as one example of many shows: Following civil shipping observations maritime patrol aircraft provided by Sweden and Luxembourg located and shadowed a pirate skiff in Somali Basin around 350 Nautical Miles east of Mogadishu until Romanian Frigate REGELE FERDINAND arrived at the scene and destroyed the boat after detaining the nine pirates found on board.

Developments and new hope in Somalia

Piracy can be fought at sea, but it can only be ended on land. After AMISOM military forces and Kenyan army hunted down Al-Shabaab and freed parts of Somalia around Mogadishu and south of it up to the Kenyan boarder there´s new hope that Transitional Federal Government of Somalia can establish control even in middle parts of Somalia with its well known pirate strongholds Hoby, Harardhere, Garacad and Eyl. Until that day naval forces are due to keep on suppressing pirate activity at sea.

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