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While awaiting more forceful action ashore, mariners looking for ways to repel pirates

Dom Yanchunas



French Navy commandos intercepting suspected pirates in January in the Gulf of Aden off the coast of Somalia. The commandos captured 19 people as they tried to take over two ships. (French Defense Minister/Associated Press)

Piracy off Somalia has become one of the maritime industry's most expensive problems at sea. The solution also will be costly — and may be rooted on dry land.

Small, lawless gangs of moonlighting fishermen using primitive boats with outboard motors are causing havoc in the Gulf of Aden shipping lanes. By the end of 2008, the pirates had hijacked more than 70 commercial vessels and amassed a staggering \$100 million in ransom.

Neither military ships nor private security organizations have found consistent success

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in thwarting the criminal activity. Recognizing the need for more aggressive enforcement, the United Nations Security Council approved a U.S. plan in December to allow the world's navies to attack the pirates inside Somalia.

Patrols on the water certainly won't be enough, said Dennis Michael Egan, a retired U.S. Coast Guard officer who teaches risk and vulnerability assessment at George Washington University. The multinational effort likely will need to regulate vessels at the docks and even delve into Somalia's dangerous domestic affairs.

"You've got a very volatile situation there ... a horrible, complex problem," said Egan. "Piracy cannot be stopped at sea. Piracy must be stopped ashore. There is lawlessness and a lack of good civil governance and there is corruption and an inability of the national government to (control) the pirates."

Among the vessels commandeered by the pirates were a fully loaded Saudi oil tanker and a Ukrainian freighter packed with weapons, including tanks, grenades and anti-aircraft arms. More than 330 mariners from 25 countries have been taken hostage.

Although few U.S.-flagged vessels sail the Gulf of Aden, North American mariners and operators have been involved in several incidents:

- In September 2008, a Canadian Navy officer was credited with foiling a pirate attack against an Italian cargo ship. The maritime security ship *HMCS Iroquois* was close enough to respond immediately to the commercial ship's mayday call. Commodore Bob Davidson also dispatched a U.S. helicopter. Davidson's response caused the pirates to abandon their attack and scatter. The commercial ship's crew spotted the pirates early because they had installed extra floodlights on their upper deck, and they sprayed the attackers with fire hoses to make boarding difficult.
- On Nov. 19, an American captain at the helm of the containership *Maersk Virginia* was able to outrun a pair of pirate boats. Shaun Hughes, of Temecula, Calif., reported that each of the two vessels was about 28 feet long. Initially, they approached his 958-foot cargo ship diagonally, but Hughes increased his speed and they couldn't catch him. The pirates instead attacked a more vulnerable vessel two miles away.
- On Nov. 30, a cruise ship operated by Miami-based Oceania Cruises Inc. came under pirate attack. Two skiffs drew to within 300 yards of *Nautica*, and the pirates fired eight rifle shots in an attempt to intercept it. Oceania said its captain began evasive maneuvers and was able to outrun the pirates.

The growing piracy problem has convinced North Carolina-based Blackwater Worldwide to deploy its private maritime security craft *McArthur*. The 183-foot ship is a former National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration science vessel. It has been refitted with Sea Tel satellite communications, a command control center and helicopter decks, and has a crew of 45.

Other security companies have sent consultants and even armed guards to the Gulf of Aden to try to protect shipping. Their effectiveness has been limited, and government militaries need to step in, said Orlando Wilson, a security consultant with Florida-based Risks Inc., which trains mega- and luxury-yacht crews on anti-piracy measures.

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“It’s going to be pretty difficult,” Wilson said. “They need to get a stable government over there, but they’ve been trying for how many years and it isn’t working. You’re going to need a lot more international naval vessels offshore. The private security really can’t do much, because they can’t do anything officially.”

Ship operators should instead explore non-lethal solutions, said Jeff Pierce, Washington-based executive director of Maritime Police International (MPI). MPI is a global security organization whose membership includes former U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Navy and law-enforcement officers.

Arming civilian maritime crews “is a very bad idea unless there is enough firepower to repel the pirates effectively and repeatedly...not something that merchant crews are capable of doing in most instances,” Pierce said.

“Many insurance companies either forbid weapons or dramatically increase rates for ships with weapons on board,” Pierce said. The insurers “have historically told crews to surrender peacefully and to let the insurance personnel handle the situation. ... Arming crews has always been a concern within the industry due to the potential for mutiny.”

The pitfalls of entering Somalia are obvious for the United States and its partners. A peacekeeping task force failed to end civil-war violence there in the 1990s. The mission was abandoned following the notorious killing of 18 U.S. soldiers.

Blackwater Worldwide offered *McArthur’s* services at the same time that several of the company’s security personnel were facing U.S. manslaughter indictments charging that they opened fire on 14 civilians in Iraq. The guards say they acted in self-defense.

Wilson said a similar international scandal likely would result if private guards wounded or killed suspected pirates.

“What if they actually shoot somebody? What laws are you going to be covered by if the private security start shooting people? A lot of people are forgetting that,” Wilson said. “And how do you know they are pirates? How do you know they’re not fishermen?”

In November, U.S. Navy Vice Adm. William Gortney endorsed the idea of placing private security guards on commercial vessels. “The ultimate solution is on the beach — Somalia — assuring security and stability and making sure the conditions that breed piracy are no longer there,” the admiral added.

The likely response in 2009, therefore, is a United Nations-blessed multinational military operation that is staffed and equipped by nations in the region and large maritime powers. Before the bolder U.N. Security Council resolution, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, “Our response has been less than the sum of its parts.”

Any international anti-piracy effort will need to include a shore-side enforcement aspect, said Egan, who has experience in maritime surveillance and counter-terrorism as the former chief of security for a joint military operation guarding ports in the

Philippines.

"The pirates have the upper hand, and they're almost impossible to stop," he said. "You've got to go ashore and get a major presence and maintain a licensing and (vessel) identification system and maintain commerce, and you have to do operations in the middle of the night. It would be extraordinarily costly over time, but you hope it works long enough that you can turn the authority over to some local organization. ... It's probably the only thing that would have any staying power."

Meantime, merchant operators are making their ships as uninviting as possible to pirates looking for an easy score.

Gortney urged mariners to use complicated rudder movements and speed adjustments and to pull up any ladders dangling alongside. Wilson said vessels should travel as quickly as possible through the trouble zone, and as far from the coastline as possible.

"Lock everything down, so even if they get on the deck, they can't get *into* the ship," Wilson said.

Pierce said mariners can use grease and high-pressure fire hoses to make boarding difficult. It's important not to skimp on costs, e.g., running vessels at full speed through the high-risk zone and faithfully maintaining 24-hour watches to alert officers to any approaching boats. Ships should be fully illuminated at night.

"In a situation like this, where you are transiting a known danger area, there's no such thing as being too vigilant," Pierce said. "Many ships are running a bare minimum crew, and complain that they cannot spare people for watch duty. This is not a viable or logical excuse. Extra personnel are much less expensive than the increased insurance rates alone, much less ransom amounts or being held hostage at gunpoint until someone gets their big pay day."

Dom Yanchunas

Tools for deterring piracy

A range of creative, non-lethal, security products are available to help mariners deter pirates.

At the forefront of anti-piracy technology comes a sound directional product called the Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), produced by American Technology Corp. Unlike a conventional speaker, sound from the LRAD is sent out as a concentrated beam of about 15 to 30°. Because the sound does not spread out in all directions, it travels greater distances while losing minimal volume.

The LRAD is capable of putting out 155 decibels as far as 500 yards without inflicting ear damage upon those outside its beam. The system can be used both for sending verbal warnings and making clear the intentions of an approaching vessel, and for deterring hostile vessels. The LRAD system has already

successfully deterred a pirate attack aboard a Seabourn Cruise Line luxury vessel.

Use of the fire hose as a defense against pirates is also getting a modern upgrade. Remote-controlled high-pressure water devices, like the Force Monitor produced by Unifire, provide defense similar to a conventional fire hose but from a safe, protected location.

Taking measures that make a ship difficult to board is another way to deter pirates while in risky waters. Nets and grease have been used to make boarding difficult, but now mariners have the option of the Mobility Denial System, developed by the Southwest Research Institute in San Antonio, Texas. It is a “non-hazardous chemical spray system that spreads a highly slippery, viscous gel to inhibit the movement of individuals or vehicles on treated surfaces such as asphalt, concrete, grass, and wood.”

Protection services are also provided to ships traveling through dangerous waters by organizations like Maritime Police International (MPI), whose plans include a Maritime Emergency Dispatch Center, Operations Center, Rescue and Medical Response, and Enforcement Operations, as well as armed convoy protection through the Gulf of Aden. Although a well-planned defense against piracy, protection services can be effective such as these can often be expensive and time-consuming to organize.

Although piracy is a difficult crime to fight given the complex nature of international law and the difficulties in the prosecution of piracy, these new technologies and services may be able to protect some mariners traveling through unsafe waters.

Kristiane Schmitt

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