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# Security experts warn maritime piracy down but not out

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BY SAM BOJARSKI



Courtesy U.S. Marine Corps

The guided-missile destroyer USS Bainbridge tows the lifeboat from the containership Maersk Alabama to the amphibious assault ship USS Boxer, in the background, after the rescue of Capt. Richard Phillips in April 2009. Phillips was held for five days by Somali pirates in the Indian Ocean after a failed hijacking attempt. The incident helped raise the profile of maritime piracy in the shipping industry.

Piracy and armed robbery against ships has hit a 22-year low, according to an annual report issued in January by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB). But despite reasonably successful efforts by shipping companies, security contractors, national governments and vessel operators to combat the threat, maritime piracy still presents a significant danger in certain parts of the world.

Somali piracy, a major concern for the IMB since the late 2000s, remains low

thanks to multilateral efforts that Cyrus Mody, an assistant director with the nonprofit organization, likens to a three-legged stool. These efforts — ship-hardening measures, an expanded naval presence in high-risk areas and national economic development — have increased safety to varying degrees throughout the world.

## Africa: A tale of two coasts

Somali piracy peaked in 2011, when the IMB recorded more than 200 incidents. In 2017, only nine actual and attempted attacks occurred in the high-risk area that encompasses parts of the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea.

Somalia has undergone massive internal changes in the past six years, including the establishment of an internationally recognized government in 2013.

“Everybody’s pouring money in there. If you look at the north, in Puntland, they seem to be pretty stable and they’re going to try and develop the tourism business,” said Orlando Wilson, a security consultant at Risks Inc., a Florida-based company that provides security services throughout the world. In September, Turkey opened a \$50 million military base in Mogadishu to train Somali soldiers.

Other foreign nations also have stepped in specifically to protect maritime commerce. For nearly a decade, the European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) and other governments have positioned warships off the coast of Somalia.

It is a different story on the other side of Africa, where an inconsistent military response combined with a

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The French warship *FS Courbet* escorts a World Food Program freighter carrying aid to Somalia in February 2013. The warship was operating near the Horn of Africa as part of Operation Atalanta, a counterpiracy mission undertaken by the European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR).

Courtesy European Union Naval Force

lack of judicial capabilities and underreporting has contributed to instability in the Gulf of Guinea region.

Shipping and security experts suspect that pirate groups there have political and military connections with states like Nigeria, creating a severe lack of accountability.

According to Philip Tinsley, maritime security manager at the Baltic and International Maritime Council, “to BIMCO’s knowledge there has never been a Nigerian pirate convicted, even though weekly incidents still

occur.”

For many years, mariners in the Gulf of Guinea have witnessed frequent attacks by well-armed perpetrators. In 2017, nearly 50 percent of all worldwide maritime attacks with guns occurred in this region. Although the number of incidents in the Gulf of Guinea decreased from 54 in 2016 to 36 in 2017, Mody doesn’t see this as a reason for optimism.

“The numbers which you are seeing in your 2017 report, you need to add another 60 at least. There is a massive degree of underreporting,” he said.

Due to the constant threat of piracy on both sides of Africa, vessel operators have taken additional precautions. In 2009, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) began issuing best management practices (BMP) for ship hardening.



Personnel from U.S. Naval Special Warfare Group 10, the Nigerian Special Boat Service and Cameroon’s Rapid Intervention Battalion use rigid-hull inflatable boats to attempt a simulated boarding of *USNS Spearhead* during Obangame Express 2014. The multinational exercise was designed to increase maritime safety and security in the Gulf of Guinea, an area that four years later is still prone to pirate attacks.

Courtesy U.S. Navy

The most recent version, BMP4, discusses armed security, which most vessels utilize while transiting through high-risk areas. “In a majority of ships these are private contractors who board the vessel and basically escort the vessel for the duration of the transit,” Mody said.

From a maneuvering standpoint, BMP4 recommends that vessels maintain top speed when traveling in high-risk waters. Tinsley said that BMP4, in tandem with regional guidance, has “helped raise awareness of potential threats.” While specifically intended for vessels operating off Somalia, many of the individual recommendations are used to counter piracy throughout the world.

### Piracy and armed robbery in Southeast Asia

The nature of piracy in Southeast Asia differs greatly from Somali piracy. “The vessels are going into an area of concern or risk. They are going into a port, into an anchorage which is known to have these incidents taking place, whereas in Somali piracy you are still on the high seas as you are crossing the high-risk area,” Mody said.

Incidents of piracy and armed robbery, the latter defined as an act of violence against a ship within a state’s territorial waters, are being addressed largely by

regional governments.

More than 75 percent of actual 2017 attacks in Southeast Asia occurred during anchorage or berthing. In Indonesia, the use of police vessels near ports and anchorages contributed to a 60 percent decline in actual and attempted attacks from 2015-2017. The IMB has worked closely with the Indonesian Marine Police in recent years to identify areas of high concern, based on incident reports from vessel operators.



Suspected pirates keep their hands in the air as directed by a search-and-inspection crew from the guided-missile cruiser *USS Vella Gulf* in the Gulf of Aden in February 2009. *Vella Gulf* was serving as the flagship for Combined Task Force 151, a multinational unit created for counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Gulf, Indian Ocean and Red Sea.

Courtesy U.S. Navy

Still, armed robbers in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines frequently target ships in port, approaching on small boats with the intent to steal equipment or the personal belongings of crewmembers. Maintaining regular patrols while anchored and keeping the vessel well-lit at all times can prevent incidents, according to Mody.

For the past couple of years, mariners in Southeast Asia have faced a more serious piracy threat. In early 2016, the Islamist militant group Abu Sayyaf, which has ties to the Islamic State, began focusing a large number

of its kidnap-for-ransom operations on the Sulu and Celebes seas. The group continues to have a strong land presence in the southern Philippines.

In response to the rising threat, the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines launched trilateral maritime patrols last June, followed by aerial patrols four months later. After three armed attacks in the Sulu and Celebes seas during the first quarter of 2017, militant activity there ceased for the remainder of the year.

“Naval vessels deployed in the region tend to respond very strongly,” Mody said. “We haven’t heard of any incidents in the recent past, and we are very happy.”

### Combating complacency

Even though piracy incidents around the world have declined recently compared to previous years, leaders in the maritime industry must continue to educate seafarers about threats and employ the proper security protocols.

The Seafarers International Union (SIU) constantly trains mariners “to help them prepare to deal with the threat of maritime piracy,” according to SIU Secretary-Treasurer David Heindel. Safety courses at the union cover many aspects of BMP4, and new members receive an anti-piracy briefing during orientation.



Boarding team members from Mauritius detain a suspect during Exercise Cutlass Express, a multinational counterpiracy exercise in the waters off East Africa near Seychelles in November 2013.

Courtesy U.S. Navy

Thanos Gournelos, a freelance security professional, believes that shipping companies should treat piracy just as seriously despite their desire to cut costs. He believes the use of armed security in the western Arabian Sea has provided a powerful deterrent, but noted that companies have begun using security guards from eastern Europe and India who are cheaper than guards from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries.

“The decrease in the number of attacks drove (the) maritime industry

to lower-cost choices," Gournelos said. "You get what you pay (for)."

According to Wilson, having someone on board the boat with a gun is often just another "box ticked" in the eyes of an insurance company. He pointed to a certain irony in the security business: When companies hire security they stop the problem, but when the problem goes away, they begin to question their decision to spend money on security.

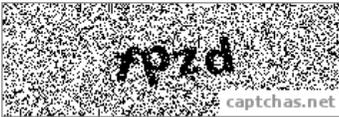
Mody said there is a need to keep all "legs of the stool" intact. Pirates still have the capability to threaten merchant ships, even in parts of the world where incidents have declined.

"Our greatest fear is that if any one of these legs crack, we may see a resurgence of incidents, because the actual pirate groups are very much present," he said.

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