

SUMMARY

Recent security incidents targeted at both military and commercial vessels in the Horn of Africa may indicate an evolving maritime threat that could lead to major maritime disruptions, particularly in the Bab el Mandeb. The full scope of the risks stemming from these attacks remains uncertain due to ambiguity surrounding the incidents, but it is clear that some of the attacks do not reflect traditional forms of piracy, for which effective responses have been developed. What can be ascertained is that there is an insecure maritime environment in the region that could potentially require the modification of current security measures to address the changing nature of the threats, specifically if they reflect conflict-related risks and maritime terrorism.

This issue paper examines:

- ▶ recently reported attacks near the Horn of Africa, to determine the nature of the emerging threats in the region, and
- ▶ the potential role of the maritime counter-piracy framework to address these threats.

INCIDENT BACKGROUND

Since the beginning of October 2016, several serious incidents against commercial and military vessels have occurred in the Bab el Mandeb strait, the Gulf of Aden, and off of the Somali coast. OBP has highlighted and classified six of these reported incident reports within the categories of: (1) piracy, (2) conflict-related violence, and (3) maritime terrorism. It should be noted that there is no consensus amongst reporting agencies on the categorization or investigation of these incidents.

PIRACY

At least two piracy-related attacks have been reported through open sources, though unconfirmed by military authorities. These include a reported attack on the fishing vessel *Imran* 200 nm off the Somali Coast on 28 October. This attack was allegedly frustrated when the captain feigned engine trouble after being boarded, which led to the pirates abandoning the attack. A second attack was reported in the Gulf of Aden on 1 January against the *Ginga Bobcat* by up to four high speed skiffs. This attack was reportedly disrupted by Chinese escort vessels and helicopters. While neither of these attacks has been confirmed, it illustrates the continued level of concern by shipping companies and navies, and signifies possible renewed probing by Somali pirate organizations.

There is one attack which has been confirmed by naval authorities:

- ▶ **October 22, Somali Basin:** The *CPO Korea* reported being attacked 330 nautical miles east of Somalia in the Arabian Sea by a fast-moving skiff with six armed men onboard. According to their report, the perpetrators fled after the crew successfully implemented self-protection measures including firing warning shots, increasing their speed, altering their course, and rigging fire hoses to impede the attack. EUNAVFOR is classifying this as the first confirmed attack on a larger merchant ship off Somalia in over two years.

Concerns about a potential resurgence of piracy are exacerbated by the drop in international naval force levels, the shipping industry's desire to return historic shipping patterns, and the reduction in armed guards on vessels in the High Risk Area.

CONFLICT RELATED VIOLENCE

Four notable attacks on vessels near the Horn of Africa took place in the latter portion of 2016 that reflect a growing trend of maritime insecurity near Yemeni territory, specifically in the Bab el Mandeb and lower Red Sea. The incidents hint that both sides in the conflict may be looking to disrupt maritime support.

- ▶ **October 1, Bab el Mandeb:** A former US Navy experimental high-speed catamaran, *HSV-2 Swift*, now flagged in the UAE, was attacked and heavily damaged by an anti-ship missile fired from shore. The attack has been claimed by Houthi rebels in Yemen.
- ▶ **October 9, Bab el Mandeb:** The *USS Mason*, a US Navy guided missile destroyer, was the target of two failed missile attacks, launched one hour apart, by unconfirmed perpetrators from a region of the Yemeni shore which is under the control of Houthi rebels. This incident has not been claimed by any group.
- ▶ **October 12, Bab el Mandeb:** The *USS Mason* again reported being targeted by shore-based missiles in a failed attack from Houthi-held territory in Yemen. This incident has not been claimed by any group.
- ▶ **December 4 (unconfirmed), Lower Red Sea:** The *Joya 8*, an Iranian freighter, was reportedly attacked by an aircraft off of the coast of Yemen. Six crew members are assumed dead, while one survived the attack. The attack has not been claimed by any group.

The threat posed by war actions in the region is significant because of the concentration of shipping in the strait and the resulting potential for collateral damage to commercial vessels by the combatants. Based on the reported incidents, this could include attacks from both sides in the conflict. Commercial vessels are especially vulnerable because they do not have the same level of defensive protection or damage control capabilities as military vessels.

MARITIME TERRORISM

Based on recently reported attacks against commercial vessels in October, a possible terrorist threat to commercial vessels in the Bab el Mandeb is worth further examination.

- ▶ **October 25, Bab el Mandeb:** The LNG tanker *Galicia Spirit* was reportedly attacked by a skiff loaded with explosives. The skiff exploded approximately 20 meters from the vessel, without injuring any of the crew. This incident has not been claimed by any group.
- ▶ **October 26 (unconfirmed), Bab el Mandeb:** According to a report from the Saudi-led coalition forces, the tanker *Melati Satu* was approached by a fast moving skiff and fired upon by a RPG. The crew sent out a distress call, which was answered by a Saudi Arabian naval vessel, which then escorted the vessel to safety. The attack has not been claimed by any group.

If maritime terrorism is confirmed as a legitimate threat, there could be vast security implications for the shipping community. This would require the industry to adapt to a complex set of threats that would differ significantly from piracy attack profiles. As a consequence, this could significantly impact the use of security teams in the Bab el Mandeb area in that they would require more flexible rules of engagement to counter the threat of terrorism.

POTENTIAL ASSOCIATED COSTS

Notwithstanding the motivations behind the increase in attacks and security incidents, if they continue there will be grave consequences for the shipping industry. The Joint War Committee (JWC) highlights the unstable situation in Yemen, whereby hostilities are ongoing in various areas, while also reminding that an extensive area of the Indian Ocean still requires vessel alertness for impending piracy attacks. Continued disruptions to maritime trade could add significant costs to commercial vessels in the Horn of Africa. Consequences could include:

- ▶ Increased cost of specialized vessel hardening and the possible requirement for highly trained private security teams able to deal with multiple threats;

- ▶ Rerouting around the African continent, if required, which would add approximately 3,000 nautical miles and additional days to shipping routes;
- ▶ Higher insurance premiums that could be the result of transiting through a high risk area;
- ▶ Higher compensation for hazardous duty by crews of vessels.

EFFECTIVENESS OF COUNTER-PIRACY FRAMEWORKS

Based on the substantial threat of piracy in the Horn of Africa over the past several years, the international community has established a framework of interconnected and cooperative systems to increase maritime security in the region. While these were initially developed to counter piracy, they could prove effective in addressing some aspects related to the more complex set of security threats that now appear to exist in the Indian Ocean.

Operational Activity

- ▶ **Reporting Framework.** The UK Maritime Trade Office (UKMTO) and the Maritime Security Center - Horn of Africa (MSC-HoA) have created a trusted system for voluntary position and incident reporting in the Indian Ocean. The system is unique in that commercial vessels have, over the years, established enduring behavior patterns that have resulted in an 80% reporting rate for transits through the High Risk Area. This system has facilitated greater threat awareness for commercial vessels and an effective system for two-way communications related to threat warnings and incident reports. The resulting Maritime Situational Awareness framework could be adapted to a wider range of threats, but current mandates have restricted the main effort to piracy-related activity.
- ▶ **Threat Analysis.** MSC-HoA and the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) staff in Bahrain are actively involved in assessing security incidents and generating threat assessments for commercial shipping in the Horn of Africa. These staff members have developed a keen understanding of the patterns of life at sea in the region through years of operations and are able to discern and reclassify threats based on long term analysis and monitoring. This acquired expertise could prove useful to address evolving maritime threats, but some key actors are restricted to counter-piracy activities.
- ▶ **Maritime Response.** Sustained trust between the shipping industry and naval forces is a key component of the counter-piracy framework. This trust has been built on the idea that the shipping industry is willing to proactively report incidents at sea because they have come to expect that their cooperation will result in a reasonable chance of a maritime response. This trust could be put in jeopardy if the reporting and cooperation is no longer tied to credible maritime response.

Vessel Self-Protection

- ▶ **Security Measures.** The first version of Best Management Practices (BMP) for vessels was released in 2009, but it has been updated and is now in its fourth version (BMP4). The recommended security procedures in BMP4, such as increased awareness, vessel hardening, and recommended speed and transit patterns have provided a baseline of security measures that could be effective in mitigating other maritime threats.
- ▶ **Armed Guards.** Embarked armed guards, which were initially focused on piracy, could potentially be a valuable tool to address other security threats if they are adequately trained and equipped. However, armed guards should be considered a crisis response mechanism that should only be employed when an elevated threat warrants their presence.

International Coordination

- ▶ **Cooperation Forum.** The Shared Awareness and De-Confliction (SHADE) forum hosted in Bahrain remains a valuable source of information sharing and consultation by Naval forces in the Indian Ocean. Since this mechanism is not based solely on piracy, it has provided an effective forum for coalition navies, independent deployers, and the shipping industry to discuss emergent threats in the Horn of Africa. This model has shown that it can be flexible and adaptable. For example, the development of the SHADE Mediterranean (SHADE MED) demonstrates how this cross-sector cooperation can effectively deal with a wider range of security challenges, in this case, human smuggling and trafficking in the Mediterranean.

CONSIDERATIONS

While counter-piracy measures have been recommended by many agencies as an effective way to combat the recent attacks, these measures need to be further evaluated to determine whether they are sufficient to counter the emerging threats or if they must be altered to better address the situation in the Horn of Africa. The following are questions for further consideration:

Vessel Self-Protection

- ▶ Industry practices recommended in BMP4 have been successful in countering piracy threats, but is a more agile and comprehensive set of recommended practices needed to effectively deal with evolving security threats?
- ▶ Are private security teams that are hired for counterpiracy equipped and trained to combat the wider range of emerging threats in the region, and if not, what measures need to be taken to prepare such teams to counter these threats?
- ▶ Current guidance for shipping is based on the continued support of international coalitions and reporting centers. Do new procedures need to be considered in case of the potential disestablishment of critical pieces of this system?

Reporting/Threat Assessment

- ▶ Does the shipping industry require comprehensive and consistent threat assessments in the High Risk Areas in the region to assist the coordination of safe passage through the region, specifically in the Bab el Mandeb?
- ▶ With limited mandates affecting some of the key agencies in the region, is it necessary to ensure the establishment of alternative systems to address the wider threats and contribute to the continuity of critical threat assessments?

Maritime Institutions

- ▶ As some coalition forces wind down counter-piracy related activities, are political procedures and frameworks in place that would allow the rapid redeployment of forces to address a possible resurgence of piracy?
- ▶ Should there be consideration for a messaging campaign to highlight the unique value-add of key maritime institutions?
- ▶ As the number of forums that were established to address piracy decline, should there be more frequent meetings of the SHADE to ensure continued cooperation between maritime actors in the region, including naval units, industry, and relevant organizations?