

Maritime Security Assessment – Somalia, Horn of Africa

Introduction

The Horn of Africa is in this case defined as Somalia, which is divided into three political entities: Southern Somalia, including autonomous areas such as the RRA State of southwest Somalia, Puntland and Somaliland. The most stable security situation is in the Somaliland, which has been mostly peaceful since declaring independence in May 1991. Somaliland has a territorial dispute with Puntland over the Sool and Sanaag region, but has managed to unite the various militias operating within its territory. Nevertheless, in April and again in September 2007, conflict broke out in the disputed areas and future clashes are expected. The southern entity of Somalia was devastated by the civil war that broke out in the early nineties, with the UN operation in 1992-95 leading only to a temporary peace. The period from 1995 and up to the last civil war and the Ethiopian invasion in 2006, was characterised by political instability and no effective ruling government. Southern Somalia is still considered to be in a state of civil war as the Islamic insurgency attacks the Transitional Federal Government and its Ethiopian allies. UK, Canada and Australia ranks Somalia overall as a country of extreme risk and advice against all travel. Irrespective of this, Somaliland and partly Puntland, is now in general fairly calm compared to southern Somalia.

Three primary issues are influencing the security situation in Somalia:

- The ongoing conflict with the Islamic insurgency
- The regional situation in the Horn of Africa
- The piracy situation off the coast.

Incident reports

Somali waters were the third worst area in the world in 2007, for piracy and armed robbery. Until 2005, there were usually less than a handful attacks on ships each year, but in 2005 the number of incidents rose to an alarming 35. The number of incidents for 2006 and 2007 were 10 and 31 respectively. However, to obtain the full picture of piracy in these waters, the number of incidents for Somalia and the Gulf of Aden has to be combined, since the majority of attacks in the Gulf of Aden are carried out by Somali pirates. This makes Somalia and the Gulf of Aden the single most exposed area for piracy and armed robbery world wide for 2007, with a total of 44 incidents.

The number of piracy attacks has changing significantly in the last three years, directly influenced by the changing political situation in the country. As a result of very little federal law enforcement, regional administrations and warlords with executive powers are essential factors in the regional security situation. Where strong warlords are in power, the numbers of piracy attacks are relatively low compared to areas where without strong warlords. The two semi-autonomous northern regions of Puntland and Somaliland which do have a functioning administration are, unlike the southern regions, almost free of piracy attacks.

On the Horn of Africa, the majority of ship attacks for 2006 and 2007 were on steaming vessels. In contrast to Nigeria, most of the traffic only passes by Somali territories on their way in and out of the Suez Canal. Attacking moving vessels is more complex and hazardous than attacking anchored or berthed ships. This, as born out by the International Maritime Bureau's recommendations on sailing distance from Somali shore that have expanded from initially 50, then 100 and now 200 nautical miles, which gives some indication of the evolving offshore capacities of Somali pirates.

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The Somali pirates are known to operate from mother ships (small freighters or similar) deploying several small and fast motorboats during the actual attack. This tactic enables them to operate over a longer period of time and in varying weather conditions. There are also several reports of pirate mother ships broadcasting false distress signals, followed by attacks by deployed smaller boats when steaming ships are approaching the mother ship to render assistance.

Skills and competence

The number of attacks increased by 120% from 2006 to 2007, but only 27% of the 44 attacks reported in 2007 was successful. By way of comparison, the percentage of successful attacks in 2007 was even lower compared to 2006 when the rate of success was 30%. These percentages include steaming, anchored and berthed ships. Compared to the success rate of 85% of the pirates operating in the Bay of Guinea, the Somali pirates appear to be less skilful, considering their modus operandi.

Since 2005, when the last piracy peak was registered, both international measures and Somali domestic political circumstances seem to have influenced the changing rate of piracy from year to year. The increased patrolling by several foreign naval forces in the area and the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) gaining power in the two most piracy affected coastal regions, Harardhere and Khismayo, almost brought piracy to a standstill in the second half of 2006. During the first quarter of 2007 the Transitional Regional Government (TRG) withdrew from the coastal areas in order to focus on the capital Mogadishu resulted in the return of the pirates to these coastal areas.

Violence and use of arms

Somali pirates are known to take crews hostage in order to demand ransom from owners. The number of crew taken hostage more than doubled from 2006 to 2007, to 177. The numbers depend on the number of crew on each ship attacked, but the coherence between the number of attacks and the number of crew taken hostage seems probable.

Aggressiveness among the pirates also seems to increase as the number of attacks rises. The number of crew injured by pirates in 2007 was three times that of 2006, and the number of crew killed in the same period doubled. However, the number of crew injured or killed is still relatively low in this area considering the numbers taken hostage, especially compared to the statistics from Nigerian waters. On the other hand, the use of firearms have increased by 150 percent, and, if we assume that most of the attacks where "type of arms" were not stated actually did involve some type of firearms, the number is nearly four times higher in 2007 than in 2006. A continuous increase in the number of firearms involved in piracy attacks is likely to result in further casualties.

The overall development of piracy and armed robbery in the Horn of Africa for 2008 is be primarily dependent on the Somali political development and stability. Without functioning law enforcement in Somalia, the piracy problem is likely to increase in 2008. An international naval force patrolling the waters will be able to provide some general control and possibly support if a vessel is attacked. Their presence is however limited in relation to the size if the area.

The last weeks there has been a worrying increase in the number of attacks. According to BIMCO the majority of attacks are currently very specifically located in the area 13 N 49 E and 13 N 53 E at the head of the Gulf of Aden. This area is not exclusive but events clearly identify this area as being particularly high risk and BIMCO is urging their members to report this to all their ships and managed ships.

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The hostage situation

As mentioned above, the number of crew taken hostage has more than doubled from 2006 to 2007. There will normally be a link between the number taken hostage, the pirates' use of arms and the number of crew being injured or killed. However, it is likely that the number of casualties among crew can be influenced by the behaviour of crew when in a hostage situation. There are some simple "do's and don'ts" principles that may be useful if crew members find themselves in a hostage situation:

- Do not oppose the pirates.
- Be anonymous/"one of the crowd".
- Avoid discussing controversial subjects such as politics, religion etc)
- Give acknowledgement of their cause/situation/disparity if they have one but not their means.
- Try to develop a relationship with some of the pirates. A relationship might protect you.
- Stay together as a group to protect each other.

Conclusion

The overall development of piracy and armed robbery on the Horn of Africa in 2008 is primarily dependent on the Somali political development and stability. Without functioning law enforcement structures in Somalia, the piracy problem is likely to continue to increase in 2008. The majority of attacks are currently very specifically located in the area 13 N 49 E and 13 N 53 E at the head of the Gulf of Aden. This area is not exclusive but events clearly identify this area as being particularly high risk

We are grateful to Bestia Risk Consulting for the production of the above information. www.bestia.no

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