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**REPORT: Why Is It So Hard to Stop West Africa’s Vicious Pirates?**

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**Why Is It So Hard to Stop West Africa’s Vicious Pirates?**

After vanquishing Somali pirates, the world is looking for a playbook that will work in the Gulf of Guinea.

**BY**[**DAN DE LUCE**](http://foreignpolicy.com/author/dan-de-luce/)

**| SEPTEMBER 23, 2016, 1:21 PM**

[](https://foreignpolicymag.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/piratesomalia.jpg?w=1681&h=1024&crop=0,0,145,0)

TO GO WITH AFP STORY BY JEAN-MARC MOJON Mohamed Garfanji, Somalia's top pirate boss, stands on sandy dunes just outside the central Somali coastal town of Hobyo as he watches the outline of a hijacked ship anchored off the coast on August 20, 2010. Garfanji, was behind some of the most spectacular catches in modern piracy -- including the 2008 capture of a Ukrainian ship packed with tanks and weapons -- and at barely 30, Garfanji now runs a small army. But his remains a Robin Hood narrative of Somali piracy as a struggle by dispossessed fishermen against vessels from Europe and Asia violating Somalia's exclusive economic zone and poaching its abundant tuna under naval protection. Fighting a losing battle against the sand that has already completely covered the old Italian port, Hobyo's scattering of rundown houses and shacks looks anything but the nerve centre of an activity threatening global shipping. AFP PHOTO / ROBERTO SCHMIDT (Photo credit should read ROBERTO SCHMIDT/AFP/Getty Images)

With little more than skiffs, ladders, and Kalashnikovs, the pirates of Somalia once hijacked giant cargo ships, extracted millions of dollars in ransom, and forced the world’s navies to send warships steaming to the Gulf of Aden. They stole headlines and Hollywood’s imagination as khat-chewing villains in the hit film [*Captain Phillips*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1535109/).

But after wreaking havoc in the sea lanes off the Horn of Africa, with more than 200 attacks every year at their peak, the once-notorious Somali pirates have virtually vanished. No cargo ship has been successfully hijacked off the coast of Somalia since the spring of 2012. This year, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) reported only three incidents.

Defeating Somalia’s scourge of piracy required unprecedented cooperation by different navies, efforts to boost stability ashore, and, perhaps most importantly, the use of armed guards on commercial vessels, a radical break with shipping practices and tradition.

The bad news is that while the counterpiracy recipe seems to have worked, shipping companies are already warning about complacency. Many fear that the United States and other navies operating in the area could declare victory and go home, potentially allowing pirates to return.

What’s more, for all its success in the Indian Ocean, the Somali playbook appears unsuited to fighting piracy in the two corners of the world where it is still raging: West Africa and Southeast Asia.

Piracy off Somalia rapidly became such a concern for shippers and sailors because of the scope of the pirates’ hijackings. Unlike pirates elsewhere in the world, the Somalis would seize an entire commercial vessel and crew and demand a ransom. Because of Somalia’s lawlessness, the armed gangs could moor cargo vessels along the coastline without having to worry about coast guards or police.

In November 2008, the pirates captured a Saudi supertanker, Sirius Star, and eventually released the ship for a ransom of $3 million, which was parachuted onto the deck. Ransoms hit an all-time high in March 2013, when the Greek tanker Smyrni was released ten months after its capture upon a payout of $9.5 million.

The rapid decline in piracy off the coast of Somalia has taken the shipping industry and governments by surprise. And there is still debate about what caused Somali piracy to trail off.

A big part of the effort came on land. International efforts to roll back al-Shabaab terrorists in Somalia, including U.S. airstrikes and an African Union military force on the ground, played an important role by bringing some order to the war-torn country, experts say.

As part of the African Union mission in Somalia, Kenyan troops in 2012 [captured](http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/DN2/How-KDF-took-charge-of-Kismayu-town/957860-2748750-51y9ibz/index.html) the port of Kismayo and chased out al-Shabaab fighters. That removed an important stronghold where the pirates had been able to operate. At the same time, some Somali clans — conservative by nature — had come to resent the pirate criminal network that disrupted the traditional order with flashy cars, narcotics, and prostitutes.

“All of a sudden you have authority — not based on tradition or religious learning but based on big guns and robbery on the high seas,” said author J. Peter Pham of the Atlantic Council. “That upset the other clans,” he said, and power began to shift away from the pirates.

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But the most visible effort against the Somali pirates came at sea. In 2009, the United States launched an international naval mission — Task Force 151 — to fend off pirates along the busy sea lanes off the Horn of Africa. The European Union and NATO each set up counterpiracy flotillas. And China, Russia, and India sent warships in their own separate efforts.

The U.S. Navy famously captured and killed groups of pirates in a few cases and prosecuted a small number in American courts who had fired on U.S. warships. European naval forces also captured pirates and destroyed a number of warehouses along the coast which were being used by the armed gangs. The international naval forces, however, mostly served as a deterrent, and as a source of crucial information and surveillance that was shared with commercial ships plying the Gulf of Aden.

The role of U.S. and other foreign navies played a “critical element” in thwarting the pirates, said David McKeeby of the State Department’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, which helped coordinate the U.S. role in counterpiracy efforts. Particularly telling was the degree of informal cooperation and information-sharing among the different navies and commercial shippers, with no central control. It was “like something of a naval pickup game,” McKeeby told Foreign Policy.

But the biggest difference may have come aboard those commercial ships. Burdened by rising insurance premiums, shippers began trying to ensure that their vessels were not sitting ducks. The vessels started cruising at higher speeds, installed barbed wire on the lower decks, built “citadel” safe rooms for crews, and toyed with foam machines, high-power water jets, and deafening sonic devices. Finally, and reluctantly, in a sharp break from decades of convention, major shipping companies also started sending out small teams of armed security guards on their vessels — usually former military troops — as a last line of defense.

Some government officials and industry experts said the armed guards, more than any other factor, were decisive in turning the tide against the pirates. Perched on a sprawling cargo ship high above the pirates’ speedboats, the armed guards could easily knock out a boat’s engine or kill gunmen long before they reached the vessel. Not a single commercial ship with armed guards on deck has been successfully hijacked off the coast of Somalia.

The deployment of armed teams aboard ships was “a real game-changer,” said Michael McNicholas, a former U.S. Army officer and now managing director of the Phoenix Group, a maritime security firm.

But it was a game-changer for shippers and insurers, too, prompting plenty of anxiety and forcing Britain and other European governments to waive prohibitions on domestic firms carrying military-style weapons on vessels. Armed guards also complicate life for the ship, since most countries impose restrictions or ban firearms aboard ships coming into port. And deadly force can turn, well, deadly.

In February 2012, two Italian marines guarding an Italian-flagged oil tanker allegedly shot and killed two Indian fishermen, whom they mistakenly took for pirates. The two marines have been charged with murder, and the legal battle over the case is still underway. Authorities in India want to prosecute the marines in an Indian court, but Rome has insisted that the case be tried in Italy because the incident occurred in international waters. Indian authorities also have charged a British security team accompanying a cargo ship with violating India’s weapons laws.

The anti-piracy campaign may have been too successful. With attacks virtually eradicated, many Western governments are questioning the need for keeping up a round-the-clock naval presence along strategic shipping routes off the Horn of Africa.

The NATO alliance has already announced it will end its counterpiracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, Operation Ocean Shield. But European governments will likely extend to December 2018 the mandate of the European Union’s Operation Atalanta, which is due to expire by the end of the year.

The shipping industry wants the warships to stay and has warned of the dangers of complacency. The IMB, which tracks piracy as part of the International Chamber of Commerce, said it “believes that a single successful hijacking of a merchant vessel will rekindle the Somali pirates’ passion to resume its piracy efforts.”

The U.S. Navy has no plans to pull out of the 31-nation counterpiracy task force it set up seven years ago, despite the sharp drop in hijackings off the Horn of Africa, said Cmdr. Bill Urban, spokesman for U.S. Naval Forces Central Command.

“Maintaining current U.S. and international community anti-piracy efforts is a proven and effective way to ensure the incidence of piracy in the region remains low,” Urban told FP.

There is so much interest in understanding what overcame Somali piracy because high-seas larceny and kidnapping are spiking in other parts of the world, especially West Africa. The Gulf of Guinea, stretching from Senegal to Angola, represents a crucial gateway for oil shipments from Nigeria and Angola, two major oil exporters. But it’s increasingly a prized hunting ground for pirates looking to kidnap captains and crew from oil-industry vessels working close to shore.

The pirates around Nigeria have started to [expand](http://oceansbeyondpiracy.org/reports/sop2015/west-africa) hostage-taking from offshore supply vessels to production storage and general cargo ships. There were 54 piracy incidents reported last year, with 37 crew members kidnapped off the Niger Delta, and 34 kidnappings there in 2014.

As a result, the area along Nigeria’s coast is now the most violent and dangerous area for shipping companies, according to Oceans Beyond Piracy, a Colorado-based nonprofit group that tracks piracy.

The problem could be even graver; the IMB estimates that only one-third of pirate attacks in the Gulf of Guinea end up being reported. Shipping companies often would rather [avoid](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Africa/0713pp_maritimesecurity_0.pdf) having to inform insurers or endure a long investigation that often comes to nothing.

“You’re not seeing the pirates and criminals captured and brought to account. That’s a risk-reward ratio that is pretty good for the pirates,” said Ian Millen, chief operating officer for U.K.-based Dryad Maritime, a security firm.

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The West African spike has prompted calls to employ similar methods, including armed guards, that wiped out piracy off Somalia. But the same playbook may not be applicable.

Unlike Somalia, the countries affected have functioning governments and militaries that are not ready to open the door to international naval forces or heavily armed foreign security guards sailing into their waters.

Dryad’s Millen said it’s highly unlikely that international armed guards will become a trend for commercial cargo vessels operating elsewhere, such as in West Africa. That’s because armed attacks there often happen in or near territorial waters. In that case, the only option is for locally sourced armed protection. British shipping companies deploying armed guards off the east coast of Africa, for example, have to operate with licenses issued in London that restrict their use outside the Gulf of Aden region.

“The thing about Somali piracy was that the vast majority of it happened on international high seas and outside territorial waters, where international law applies,” Millen told FP. “Contrast that to the Gulf of Guinea and Nigeria; those areas are not failed states, and they do have their own sovereignty.”

The U.N. Security Council, whose resolutions helped pave the way for an international response to the Somali piracy crisis, has urged international action to help Nigeria and other governments in West Africa contain the spreading threat of piracy, which is spooking shipping companies and further depressing coastal economies already hammered by cheap oil.

For crews laboring along the African coast, the hijacking epidemic represents a dangerous and growing reality. Hostages seized by the pirates are usually held on small islands in the Niger Delta and often beaten, subjected to mock executions, denied medical treatment, and fed limited rations, according to a report from Oceans Beyond Piracy.

The Polish skipper of MV Szafir, a Cyprus-flagged cargo ship, recounted an [attack](http://gcaptain.com/nigerian-pirates-release-five-polish-crew-members/) on his vessel last November that left him and his crew at the mercy of pirates, who kidnapped him and four others for ransom.

“They were aiming at us with machine guns,” [said](http://oceansbeyondpiracy.org/reports/sop2015/west-africa) Capt. Krzystof Kozlowski. “Right between the eyes. There was not any possibility to do anything. We had to adjust to them; it was the only chance to survive.”

Photo credit: ROBERTO SCHMIDT/AFP/Getty Images

Correction, Sept. 26, 2016: Somali pirates seized the Sirius Star in November 2008. An earlier version of this article mistakenly said it was in November 2009. The Greek ship Smyrni, whose name was previously misspelled, was released for ransom in 2013, not 2012.

**Dan De Luce** is Foreign Policy’s chief national security correspondent. [@dandeluce](http://www.twitter.com/dandeluce)

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