Anti-Piracy Initiatives Should Reflect U.S. Maritime Interests

Jena Baker McNeill

Recent headlines have been dominated by the exploits of pirates operating in the Cape of Aden's global shipping lanes. By seizing cargo ships and oil tankers, these modern pirates have had a tremendous impact on the security of the maritime domain.

It is important that the U.S. government continues to monitor these developments and supports anti-piracy initiatives through established international forums. Such a role recognizes that we cannot ignore the potential impact of piracy on the supply chain, energy security, or our nation's counter-terrorism missions. For the time being, though, piracy acts are largely an issue for private shippers and affected nations.

It Is About the Money. These modern pirates are not unlike their swash-buckling predecessors. Much like searching for treasure, their primary goals are economic. Piracy is easy money—pirates take over a ship, seize a few hostages and millions of dollars in cargo, and wait for the shipping company to eventually pony up the money. The shipping companies have cargo that needs delivery, and maneuvering through these channels is the quickest and most cost-effective way to do so—even if it means paying off pirates.

Some insist that this recent rash of piracy is a problem of global concern. For instance, French President Nicolas Sarkozy called a recent pirate attack on French tourists an action that "the world cannot accept," hinting at more aggressive action by other nations. Among other initiatives aimed at this issue, the U.N. Security Council recently passed a resolution that would encourage member states to help combat piracy.

The actual role that the United States should play in this issue, however, is unclear. Currently, the U.S. Navy already has some presence in this region, in the form of three ships, through the Combined Task Force 150—a multinational counter-terrorism force. Diverting significant resources to the piracy issue or instituting a U.S.-led response, however, would seem ill-placed considering that, unlike some of our allies, very little U.S. cargo travels through the Cape of Aden and other routes that often come in contact with pirates. Furthermore, the Cape of Aden is not the only place where piracy occurs, so anti-piracy operations must not encourage the pirates to merely move to friendlier, less-patrolled waters.

But there may be incentives for the U.S. to use select intervention when necessary. There is growing concern that these pirate groups could team with terrorist and radical Islamist groups—such as al-Qaeda—that may seek to harm the United States. Furthermore, the U.S. is a maritime nation and does have an interest in ensuring that other nations can

The Heritage Foundation
LEADERSHIP FOR AMERICA

protect their own supply chains, disruption of which can impact the global markets. And there is a need to develop, through mutual cooperation between the U.S. Coast Guard and Navy, maritime constabulary power—America's ability to use law enforcement and military capabilities to maintain law and order at sea.

Actions in the U.S.'s Interest. The United States, however, is likely best served by not engaging this issue in a way that would be perceived as a military presence, unless our intelligence demands intervention. Current Coast Guard leadership in this area (with Navy support) has been an excellent example of the more hands-off measures in which our nation should engage. The United States can adequately serve the interests of Americans while preventing disruption of the global supply chain by taking the following actions:

- *Promote International Responses to the Piracy Situation.* While efforts to combat this issue should not be U.S.-led, there is nothing wrong with supporting other international partners who want to tackle piracy. Leadership should come from countries whose naval capacities could have an impact on securing these maritime regions and who have a dog in the piracy fight. A great example is the Japanese—whose ships have been attacked by these pirates—and are consequently looking to engage in more international cooperation and have assisted in anti-piracy initiatives in the Straight of Melacca. Furthermore, any response should incorporate the private sector shippers—without their cooperation, the incentive for piracy will still exist and security at sea cannot be accomplished.

- *Modernization of the United States Coast Guard.* Programs such as the USCG's International Outreach and the North Pacific and North Atlantic Coast Guard Forums have produced tremendous cooperation between the Coast Guard and nations around the world to combat environmental problems, assist in natural disasters, and other activities. And some of these USCG initiatives have been used to help combat piracy without any formal U.S. presence. But currently, the Coast Guard's fleet is extremely outdated. The U.S. should divert more attention towards replacing and upgrading these assets.

- *Highlight AFRICOM as a Resource for African Leaders.* AFRICOM was created to work with African leaders and governments to build their capacity to respond to threats like piracy before they become violent conflicts or widespread problems. Places like Somalia, where the government is weak at best, are havens for pirates because of political and economic volatility. The U.S. government should work with allies in the region to focus more closely on piracy, support regional efforts to address these concerns, and bolster the capacity of African nations to tackle these problems. This approach avoids a large military presence and attends to the issue in a less-evasive, grassroots manner, ensuring that American interests remain at the forefront.

- *Bolster U.S. Intelligence-Gathering and International Efforts Inside Somalia.* Considering that many of these pirates are based in Somalia, it is vital that we continue to monitor their movements to ensure that their relationships with terrorist organizations do not develop into these pirates funding acts of terrorism against the U.S. and its allies—a development that might demand U.S. intervention. It is also fundamental that the international community considers long-term initiatives that can ensure more stable governance in Somalia.

U.S. Security at the Forefront. If the U.S. does not act in its own interests first, it will do little to protect the security of Americans, and it will perpetuate fears by African countries that the U.S. seeks to have a sustained military presence in the region for less than honest reasons. The U.S. does have some role to play to ensure that the international maritime domain is more secure. But we must continue to assess our actions in terms of what is in the U.S.'s interest and encourage robust global partnerships for constabulary operations.

—*Jena Baker McNeill is Policy Analyst for Homeland Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*

The Heritage Foundation
LEADERSHIP FOR AMERICA