

Implications of the use of hijacked vessels by Somali pirates

Background

Somali pirates have used a variety of captured vessels for various purposes in the past years. The uses of such vessels have ranged from floating service stations, to temporary mother ships or as ferries for reinforcements to ongoing operations (e.g. the *Hansa Stavanger* in April 2009). Initially, the operational use of mother ships in areas of operations was confined to captured dhows or relatively inconspicuous fishing vessels or smaller craft, such as the tug *Yenegroa Ocean* in 2008. Most of these mother ship uses were limited in scope.

Since the first sortie of the hijacked general cargo ship *Izumi*, however, the parameters for mother ship use by pirates appear to have changed. The ship departed from its Somali anchorage in early November 2010, attacked the product tanker *Torm Kansas* first by deploying her attack skiffs and subsequently by closing distance to rifle shot range and opening fire directly on the tanker. A day later the *Izumi* was used to attack an escorted World Food Programme vessel.

In short order, a number of captured merchant vessels were pressed into pirate service on this model beginning with the *Polar*, the *Hannibal II*, the *Motivator*, and the *York*. Some vessels like *Polar* and *Izumi* have now completed multiple patrols since their hijacking. The *Polar* and the *Motivator* have so far been successful in assisting in hijackings. The pirates embarked on the *Polar* hijacked the *Albedo* on 26 November 2010 and the *Shuih Fu No. 1* on 25 December 2010. The pirates operating from the *Motivator* successfully captured the *Ems River* on 27 December 2010.

Assessment

The use of ocean-going merchant vessel introduces some significant changes to the Somali pirate modus operandi.

- **Reduced dependency on seasons, currents and weather conditions.** The use of ocean-going vessels allows the pirates to transit Monsoon-affected sea zones irrespective of weather and currents. Pirate activity from captured merchantmen will become an all-year feature.
- **Increased range.** Especially during Monsoon season, pirates can now venture out to calmer sea zones, including the waters around Madagascar and the Equatorial waters of the Indian Ocean towards the Laccadive Sea and the One and a Half Degree Channel.
- **Higher transit speeds.** In spite of deteriorating performance of captured merchantmen, pirate action groups can now be expected to advance at a rate of 10 kts (240nm per day).
- **Mother ships used for direct attack.** If the target is sufficiently slow, pirates have and will manoeuvre to attack with the mother ship, exploiting their numbers on the vessel and consequently their massed firepower.
- **Threat of reprisal against captured crew.** The pirates have and will threaten reprisals against the captured crews of the mother vessels. This circumscribes the ability of navies to interfere in attacks.

Assessment

The improved modus operandi of Somali piracy presents a number of challenges for navies and shipboard defence. However, it also opens up new opportunities as the pirate threat becomes more “symmetrical”.

New challenges:

- **More work for overextended navies.** Navies will be forced to divide their attention between “keeping tabs” on the large mother vessels and maintaining surveillance of sea zones as a whole and disrupting pirate operations.
- **More volume of fire, better aimed fire.** When utilising a captured merchant vessel in an attack, pirates eliminate the small boat disadvantage. They can pour fire into the target vessel from bridge level, reducing survivability of the bridge team. Also, if faced with armed opposition, pirates now enjoy the same stable firing platform and amount of “natural cover” like the defenders. On balance, however, pirate action groups will be larger than embarked security teams. Pirates on the captured ship will be able to provide effective suppression of an armed team while the boarding team comes alongside the target vessel.
- **Heavier weaponry.** Hijacked vessels are customarily equipped with machine guns up to and including 12.7 and 14.5mm calibres for self-defence against other pirate groups. It is reasonable to assume that the weapons will remain on board during the patrols and that they will be used in self-defence or against armed resistance. This variant would be lethal for small escort vessels, who would now suffer from being poor and vulnerable gun platforms.
- **Extended endurance and capabilities of attack teams.** Backed by plentiful supplies of ammunition and fuel on board the captured vessels, attack teams can be expected to operate more aggressively and to pursue more tenaciously. Attack teams that have boarded a target vessel and are up against a citadel situation can draw on tools and reinforcements to break down citadel defences.
- **Collision hazard to slow moving or static assets.** Especially offshore operations will face the added risk of the mother ship interfering with operations including entering exclusion zones, running over equipment and anchor lines etc.

New opportunities:

- **Higher predictability of pirate action groups.** The captured ships at sea will be closely monitored by the navies and their positions will be made public. This allows other vessels to avoid known areas of operations of these merchant vessel-borne groups. Plotting courses and past patrols of hijacked mother vessels will also allow ship operators to establish patterns.
- **Better visibility of pirate action groups.** The merchant vessel-based pirate action groups will be impossible to miss for alert and well-briefed crews. By generally avoiding CPAs of less than 10nm or more (or remaining out of visual range), vessel can pre-empt attack situations at much longer range than with the boat-based pirate attack groups, which only come into visual range at 4-5nm.
- **Better identification of pirate action groups.** It is generally known, which mother ships are at sea at any given time. With mug shots of the vessels, unambiguous identification by any look-out will be possible, should the hijacked mother vessel be encountered at visual range.

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