

NATO warships head to Somalia

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Warships from the NATO powers and elsewhere are converging on the Gulf of Aden, off the coast of Somalia, ostensibly to tackle piracy and to escort ships through the Gulf.

The rush was sparked by the hijacking of the MV Faina at the end of September by pirates operating from northern Somalia. The MV Faina, registered in Belize but managed by Ukrainian company Tomax Team Inc., is carrying heavy weapons including 33 ex-Soviet T-72 tanks and armoured personnel carriers, ammunition and spare parts.

The weapons were apparently to be unloaded in Kenya for ultimate delivery to the government of South Sudan. Kenya has denied this, though its ambassador was recently summoned to Khartoum to shed light on the question.

The United States government's key concern is that the arms do not find their way to Islamic insurgents fighting Somalia's puppet Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which the US supports. The US has vowed to prevent the pirates from offloading the arms.

The ship is still being held captive, reportedly by some 50 people from two different clans—the Majarteen sub-clan of the Darod tribe and the Habre Gedir sub-clan of the Hawiye tribe. The Hawiye and the Darod have a long history of rivalry in Somalia. The pirates initially demanded a \$35 million ransom, then cut it to \$20 million. They now appear to be asking for \$5 million.

The first warships on the scene were from the Combined Task Force 150, a "counterterrorism" initiative whose main contributors are Britain, France, Germany and the US. Based in Djibouti, the Force has 14 or 15 ships patrolling the Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

A NATO flotilla of seven warships from the US, Italy, Germany, Greece, Turkey and Britain, which form operation Allied Provider, has since arrived in the area purportedly to help escort UN World Food Programme (WFP) food shipments. The European Union is set to take over this role toward the end of the year with ships from Belgium, Cyprus, France, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Britain. India too says it is sending warships to protect its shipments, and South Korea is considering doing so.

The WFP regards escorts as essential, since 90 percent of its grain is shipped by sea, and 2.4 million Somalis rely upon its shipments of 30,000-35,000 tonnes of aid each month. However, ex-British Defence Minister Des Browne pointed to

wider concerns, saying that protecting the EU's security and way of life depended on being able to secure global trade routes. "It's not just inside the EU or on the borders of the European Union, it's off the coast of Somalia and Kenya, more broadly, it's ensuring that oil that travels around this world travels around it securely," he said.

French diplomats have also been lobbying the UN General Assembly for an international maritime police force, with French President Nicolas Sarkozy calling for such a body to take both "preventative" and "punitive" actions against pirates.

Somalia's Foreign Ministry has given permission to use force if necessary against the pirates, on the condition that foreign powers coordinate with Somalian officials beforehand. NATO has confirmed that it "may use force" under its rules of engagement and in line with international law.

Russia enters the situation

Russia also despatched a frigate to the region just prior to the hijacking of the MV Faina, whose crew includes two Russians. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that nations with naval vessels in the area should work together against pirates, and that Russia, "like the US and EU," will act on the basis of United Nations resolutions calling for international action against piracy.

"It would be useful to coordinate the naval forces that are deployed," said Lavrov. "It seems everything is leading to this."

Somalia's President Abdullahi Yusuf has agreed to allow Russian forces to fight pirates both off the coast and on Somalian soil, opening up the possibility of a Russian base in Somalia, with the potential for Russian troops to prop up the TFG.

Under a recent peace agreement between warring factions in Somalia, Ethiopia may pull its troops out of Somalia over the next few months. A shipment of Ethiopian weapons, including tanks, left Mogadishu port last month as part of the withdrawal. There are now estimated to be just 2,500 Ethiopian soldiers left inside Somalia, down from a peak of 15,000-18,000.

Somalia's ambassador to Moscow, Mohammed Mahmud

Handule, announced, “We want Russia to start military and technical cooperation with our country as soon as possible. Active talks are currently under way between our countries’ foreign ministries on Russia’s assistance in training Somalian border guards, combat units and security services.”

Somalia also announced its intention to recognize the independence of the former Soviet republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. So far, only Nicaragua has backed Russia’s stance against the position of Georgia.

Russia’s strategic return to the region is significant. Somalia has been in the front line of the US “war on terror.” But Somalia was allied with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, until the overthrow of the dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991, and the collapse of the USSR. Russia also recently forged links with Venezuela, in another strategically important area historically dominated by the US.

Piracy

Chatham House, a British Foreign Office think tank, recently produced a report on piracy in Somalia. It calls for a reinforced international naval presence in the region with a strengthened European component to combat piracy, and proposes a coastguard run on Somalia’s behalf by the African Union or the United Nations.

The report notes that whilst piracy has been a problem in Somali waters for at least 10 years, the number of attempted and successful attacks has risen over the last three years. Piracy in 2008 is more than double that of 2007, with over 60 attempted or successful hijackings reported.

Pottengal Mukundan, the International Maritime Bureau’s director, said 12 vessels and 259 crew members were currently being held for ransom. The Bureau estimates that 16,000 ships a year sail through the Gulf of Aden, a 920 by 300-mile basin separating the Arabian coast from the Horn of Africa, used to transport more than 10 percent of the world’s petroleum.

Somalia is especially vulnerable to piracy since ships slow down off its northern coast as they enter the Red Sea en route north to the Suez Canal. It has a 3,000-kilometre coastline, one of the longest in Africa, with many isolated beaches ideal for small boats.

Pirates have increased their range by using fishing vessels as a base for operations and are now able to reach the Yemeni coastline. They have obtained heavier weaponry, including Kalashnikov assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and use powerful speedboats with global positioning systems.

The East African Seafarers’ Assistance Programme estimates that the number of pirates in Somalia has grown from about 100 five years ago to more than 1,000. The gunmen, often originally

poor fishermen, can earn thousands of dollars in just a few months.

Piracy is only a symptom of the power vacuum inside Somalia. The only period during which piracy virtually vanished was during the six months of rule by the Islamic Courts Union in the second half of 2006. After the ICU was overthrown by US-backed Ethiopian troops in January 2007, piracy quickly re-emerged, with the average ransom tripling over this period.

Chatham House believes that money from ransoms helps fuel the war in Somalia, including funds to the Islamist al Shabab militia. Sheikh Mukhtar Robow, a spokesperson for al Shabab, denies this, but adds that whereas it is “a crime to take commercial ships,” “hijacking vessels that carry arms for the enemy of Allah is a different matter.”

The pirates also distance themselves from any group. “We have nothing to do with insurgents or terrorist organizations. We only need money,” said their spokesman Sugule Ali. “We don’t consider ourselves sea bandits. We consider sea bandits those who illegally fish in our seas and dump waste in our seas and carry weapons in our seas. We are simply patrolling our seas. Think of us like a coastguard.”

Pirate attacks have driven up insurance premiums tenfold for ships using the Gulf of Aden, though some insurers are cutting charges by up to 40 percent if boats hire their own security. This has led to an influx of such firms into the region and represents a new and potentially lucrative market for security firms like Blackwater Worldwide who are scaling back operations in Iraq.

The International Maritime Bureau has warned that armed guards on board ships may encourage pirates to use their weapons or spark an arms race. Blackwater is being investigated for its role in the fatal shooting of 17 Iraqi civilians in September 2007.

“Security companies haven’t always had the lightest of touches in Iraq, and I think Somalia is a pretty delicate situation,” said Roger Middleton of Chatham House.

However, a senior British naval commander recently urged commercial ships operating in the region to hire their own private security companies to deal with the threat, on the basis that it was essentially a legal minefield trying to take on the pirates.

“This is a great trend,” agreed Lt. Nate Christensen, a spokesman for the US 5th Fleet. “We would encourage shipping companies to take proactive measures to help ensure their own safety.”



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