

Force no solution to Somali piracy

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OTTAWA — Now that Somali pirates have captured the world's attention by seizing a massive oil tanker off the Horn of Africa, the cry has gone up: "Send in the Marines!"

Yet a military response will do little if anything to solve the problem of piracy along this key shipping route. A lasting solution requires that the international community summon the political will to heal the festering sore that is Somalia.

This of course is not what business wants to hear. Owners of the 20,000 ships that ply the waters off Somalia each year en route to or coming from the Suez Canal are already facing higher costs in the form of steep insurance premiums, danger pay for crews, and equipment such as water cannons or sonic blasters meant to deter pirates.

Those unlucky enough to have their ship seized and money demanded, which has happened 33 times in 2008 (including to a Turkish ship carrying Canadian iron ore to China), can add hefty ransom payments on top of that. All this is happening at a time when the world economy is slowing, taking shipping volumes with it.

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It is not surprising then, that the military option is alluring. Why not, as some business groups suggest, establish military convoys to escort ships through the danger zone, or send a U.S. aircraft carrier battle group to stand permanent guard in the area?

There are at least two reasons to argue against such a move: it's too costly and, more importantly, it would only be a stopgap measure.

It costs about \$1.1-billion (U.S.) a year just to operate an aircraft carrier battle group (the carrier and its escorts).

That is, admittedly, the gold-plated option. Still, even smaller naval warships do not come cheap. With the world economy now headed for recession, it would be hard to find a country where taxpayers would cheerfully shoulder additional military expenses if another option were available.

One such option is to have ship owners pay for extra security themselves. Some are already doing so, hiring private military contractors (whom we used to call mercenaries) to act as armed guards on ships or to patrol nearby.

But like warships, armed private contractors do not come cheap. Ship owners would rather have governments pick up the tab and are increasing pressure on them to do so.

While it is right for them to call for government action, they are asking for the wrong thing. To solve any problem, you have to get at the root causes. Chief among them is that Somalia does not have a functioning government and has not had one since the dictator Siad Barre was toppled and he fled the country in 1991.

There have been periods and pockets of stability since, but no one has succeeded in ruling the country. The Transitional Federal Government, backed by a number of Western countries, is a fig leaf. It has never been able to wield power and currently relies on troops from Ethiopia in an increasingly bloody and multi-sided civil war that also involves an array of warlords and remnants of the Islamic Courts Union.

Outside governments have intervened sporadically. Yet even when their intentions were good, the results were usually poor. Anyone who has seen the movie *Blackhawk Down* will recall that what started as a humanitarian mission ended in disaster in 1993 when supporters of a Somali warlord killed U.S. troops.

An international attempt to install the Transitional Federal Government has turned out badly because the government lacks popular support. More recently, the U.S. supported some warlords in exchange for their promise to hunt down al-Qaeda suspects. They have used some of the funds to fight their own battles.

The U.S. also backed the 2006 invasion of Ethiopian troops, an ill-considered move given that Somalis suspect their old foes of trying to seize the country. Last but certainly not least in this list of international meddlers, Eritrea, a long-time opponent of Ethiopia, is supporting the more radical members of the Islamic Courts Union, in part to keep its adversary occupied in Somalia.

The resulting anarchy has destroyed the economy and any chance for ordinary people to earn a stable and legal livelihood. It has also meant that there are no government forces to provide security and enforce the law on land or in coastal waters.

In the absence of a Somali navy or coast guard, other countries have helped themselves in the rich fishing grounds off the coast. Some buy questionable licences issued by warlords and politicians of dubious standing, thus fuelling the fighting.

Many use illegal fishing techniques, including nets with small mesh sizes or underwater lighting, secure in the knowledge that no Somali coast guard will be along to stop them. Some countries have used the coast as a dumping ground for hazardous waste which, according to the UN special envoy for the country, includes nuclear material. Little wonder then that foreign ships can be cast by the pirates as acceptable targets.

These then are the conditions in which piracy has flourished. Sending warships to the area will address the symptoms without touching the disease. Killing a few pirates, as an Indian naval vessel did this week, may well discourage them for a while. Still, the prizes are too large and the alternatives are too bleak for that deterrence to last long.

If ship owners and companies sending cargo want to make these waters safe again, they should be putting pressure on their governments to stop meddling and make a concerted effort to end the chaos in Somalia. Restoring stability is not something that can be done overnight. But it is the only real solution to the problem of piracy off the Horn of Africa.

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