

**Forum:** United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

**Issue:** Strengthening Regional and International Cooperation to Combat Piracy in East Africa

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## **Introduction:**

Piracy in East Africa is a growing international concern; it undermines maritime security, destabilises regional stability, and weakens economies. Piracy networks bring insecurity and corruption to coastal regions, and often use violence and fear to avoid the enforcement of the law. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), maritime crime, including piracy, generates significant illicit revenue, the majority of this money going into further developing criminal organisations.

Piracy contributes heavily to organised crime, providing the funding needed to further develop these groups. Criminal organisations have heavy impacts on a region's economy; they increase costs through disrupted trade routes, worsen living standards and discourage potential investment in these areas, all of which only further strengthen the grip the criminal organisation has on the region.

Despite numerous attempts to establish international agreements, task forces, and other organisations to combat piracy, international cooperation is insufficient, and the global response is fragmented. Varying legal frameworks, under-equipped governments, and limited intelligence sharing allow the spread of piracy networks. The increased use of modern technologies, such as encrypted communication and advanced navigation tools, helps these groups avoid detection and demand more modern solutions if piracy is to be stopped.

To effectively address the growing threat of piracy networks in East Africa, coordinated international action is essential. This includes strengthening maritime security efforts, greater enforcement of coastal and naval control, harmonisation of legal frameworks, and increased monitoring of maritime routes to prevent their use for criminal activity. Equally important is the development of international information sharing platforms regarding transnational criminal organisations to allow for more unified combatance of criminals who abuse jurisdictional limitations.

This report will outline key parties and the role of the United Nations, as well as other stakeholder nations and organisations. Furthermore, this report proposes potential solutions and examines previous attempts to resolve the issue of piracy through regional and international cooperation.

## Definition of key terms:

**Maritime Piracy:** Maritime Piracy is defined, for the purposes of this research report, to be the plundering, hijacking, or detention of a ship in international waters.

**Bab el-Mandeb Strait:** The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a 'strait between Arabia to the northeast and Africa to the southwest which connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean to the southeast'. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait plays a significant strategic role in international shipping operations as well as, correspondingly, a significant location of piracy as a 'chokepoint' in the passage of the Red Sea.

**Transnational Organised Crime:** Transnational organised crime is organised crime coordinated across various national borders. Organised crime refers to criminal activities that are planned and controlled, typically carried out by large organisations.

**Black Market:** A market facilitating the transaction of illegal goods or services, or to avoid government oversight and taxes, or both. The black market typically involves the selling of illicit drugs. In modern times, the black market is more commonly found online, on the "dark web".

**Cartel:** A structured criminal organisation made up of independent groups involved in the trafficking and distribution of illicit drugs. Designed to control territory and supply on a large scale, often through fear and violence.

## Background:

The international community has seen the far-reaching consequences of ongoing tensions and piracy within the East African region. Piracy within this area emerged as an international concern in the early 2000s. The issue developed mainly as a result of the growing political instability, lack of governance, and limited law enforcement capacities. These issues were particularly severe off the coast of Somalia and in the waters of the Gulf of Aden following the

collapse of the Somali central authority in 1991. With ineffective control of territorial waters and a growing amount of unregulated maritime activity, the exploitation of marine resources and the use of the region in criminal trafficking increased significantly. This started what would later be recognised as an economic disaster for the coastal communities in the region, many of whom relied on fishing for food and prosperity, only further contributing to motivations to join criminal organisations.

### **Strategic Importance of the Red Sea Region**

The Red Sea Region hosts significant geopolitical and economic importance to all major parties, as defined in the subsequent section. Spillover effects are also lobbied on all sea-faring nations in the largest scale, particularly due to the importance of the Red Sea region in international maritime trade. The Red Sea Region is a vital route for global trade, with the previously defined Bab el-Mandeb Strait being a critical chokepoint for such maritime traffic. Movements of trade in this region can have substantial implications for global trade, energy markets, and security concerns within the region.

### **Nature of Maritime Piracy in the Red Sea**

The Red Sea Region and adjacent waters, including the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea, have seen varying degrees of piracy throughout previous centuries, with the early 2000s witnessing a surge which is still felt in an ongoing sense. This piracy originally began in Somalia, driven by economic and governmental instability. Pirates in the Red Sea utilise a tactic which includes small and fast boats to intercept and board larger commercial vessels. Oil tankers, cargo ships, and fishing vessels are the most prominent targets, with their crews being held for ransom. More sophisticated methods are continually being adapted.

Many coastal communities in the Red Sea regions, especially within the borders of Somalia, suffer from extreme poverty and a thorough lack of economic prosperity. The opportunity to be freed from such poverty is a common driving force into piracy-based roles, despite the illegality of such operations. This is particularly rampant due to weak governance and inadequate maritime law enforcement in countries including Somalia and Yemen, which have allowed for a boost in Red Sea Piracy. The lack of effective national governance due to the presence of internal conflicts further exacerbates the issue of regional piracy.

## **Lack of international communication**

One of the main factors preventing effective prevention of piracy in East Africa is a lack of transnational communication among affected states. Despite the existence of organisations such as INTERPOL or the UNODC, national law enforcement agencies and maritime authorities often operate independently with little to no cross-border communication. Political tensions and security concerns often discourage these agencies, and states may believe that their piracy concerns are isolated and that there is little need for communication.

This disjointed approach is not effective for long-term results and allows piracy networks to exploit and take advantage of blind spots between national jurisdictions. Pirate groups use methods such as operating across multiple maritime zones, moving resources through international financial systems, and coordinating internationally through digital communication to take advantage of these flaws.

The absence of international cooperation also undermines efforts to make global or regional threat assessments. When countries fail to provide data or refuse to share valuable case insights, it allows shifts in piracy activity, emerging routes, and the growth of criminal networks to go undetected, leading to permanent action only being taken after issues become severe. This fragmentation leads to inconsistent responses to threats, with some nations over-prioritising local enforcement and some even being unaware of growing risks. With consistent, coordinated action, gaps can be filled in enforcement and help prevent piracy networks from becoming a major multinational issue.

## **Timeline of Key Events:**

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|----------------------------|--|
| <b>December 19th, 1988</b> | Adoption of the UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (Vienna Convention).   |
| <b>October 8th, 1997</b>   | Creation of the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (ODCCP), done through the merging of the UN's Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) and the Centre for International Crime Prevention (CICP). This was renamed to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2001. |

- November 15th, 2000** Adoption of the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Convention).
- June 1st, 2008** The UN Security Council adopts resolution 1816, allowing international naval forces to enter Somali territorial waters to combat piracy.
- October 1st, 2008** The European Union launches Operation Atalanta (EU NAVFOR) to protect vulnerable vessels and deter piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.
- February 9th, 2011** Over 200 pirate attacks were reported in 2011, with more than 30 ships hijacked. This includes the MV Savina Caylyn and MV Irene SL, both oil tankers which carried a combined \$300m USD of crude oil.
- October 8th, 2018** Operation Lionfish by INTERPOL results in 1,300 arrests and seizure of 55 tons of drugs across 93 countries.
- November 21st, 2012** The United Nations adopts Resolution 2077, renewing international efforts to combat piracy and emphasising the need for comprehensive solutions, including addressing root causes such as poverty and governance.

### **Major parties involved:**

**Djibouti:** Djibouti is a country of significant strategic importance when addressing conflict, tensions, and piracy within the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. This conflict has led to Djibouti hosting a significant international presence within its borders, including hosting military bases from the United States, China, Japan, and Saudi Arabia. Countries such as France and Italy also hold various military investments within the country in efforts to combat piracy in the Red Sea.

**European Union (EU):** The EU has been largely involved in the prevention of piracy through counter operations such as Operation Atalanta, which focuses on protecting vessels, deterring piracy, and supporting regional maritime security capacity-building in East Africa.

**INCB (International Narcotics Control Board):** Established in 1968 with the “Single Convention on Narcotics”, the INCB is a semi-judicial independent body, overseeing the implementation of UN drug control conventions and ensuring they are followed accordingly.

**Somalia:** Somalia has historically been home to significant amounts of Red Sea piracy organisations. This has led to internal security challenges due to Somalia’s challenges in addressing the large-scale issue, causing trouble in security and governance. This has been attributed to economic strain and international isolation as a consequence of this piracy.

**International Maritime Organisation (IMO):** The International Maritime Organisation (or the IMO) is a United Nations specialised agency with the responsibility for the safety and security of shipping and the prevention of marine and atmospheric pollution by ships. This agency was created following a 1948 UN conference in Geneva, Switzerland, with a large place in the global development of measures to combat maritime piracy.

**International Naval Forces:** Various International Naval Forces have been deployed to maintain security in East Africa from a piracy standpoint. Coalitions have been established, such as the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), the European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR), which has created Operation Atalanta, and Operation Ocean Shield (OOS), created by NATO, and have been deployed for peacekeeping operations in the Red Sea. The roles of these International Naval Forces include the responsibility to patrol the Sea, provide escorts for vulnerable ships, and respond to piracy incidents.

**INTERPOL (International Police) or ICPO (International Criminal Police Organization):** INTERPOL (also known as the ICPO) is an intergovernmental organization that facilitates the international cooperation of different national police agencies to prevent and control crime. This is often used to capture and extradite fleeing criminals or take down transnational crime organisations.

## Relevant UN treaties, resolutions, and reports:

- UNCND Resolution, March 16th, 2012 (E/CN.7/2012/CRP.1) – Strengthened international cooperation to address the links between illicit drug trafficking and illicit firearm trafficking and recognising that the drug problem remains relevant as a global concern.
- UN Resolution 1816, June 2, 2008 – Authorised international naval forces to enter Somali territorial waters to combat piracy.
- Palermo Convention, November 15th, 2000 (A/RES/55/25) – Aims to combat all forms of multinational organised crime through international cooperation, joint information networking, witness protection and extradition agreements.
- UN Resolution 1846, December 2, 2008 – Extended Resolution 1816 and encouraged nations to deploy naval vessels to actively combat piracy.
- UN Resolution 1851, December 16, 2008 – Allowed international forces to take action on Somali territory to suppress piracy.
- Vienna Convention, December 19th, 1988 (E/CONF.82/15) – A complex legal framework for extradition, seizure of stock, financial surveillance and precursor control. Targets links between drug trafficking and organised crime.
- UN Resolution 1897, November 30, 2009 – Called for nations to prosecute captured pirates and improve judicial capacities to handle piracy cases.
- UN Resolution 2077, November 21, 2012 – Renewed prior authorisations and emphasised the need for long-term solutions.

*Note: All summaries were written based on legislation within such official copies. It is recommended to read these resolutions personally to understand the specifics and meaning pertaining to each sovereign nation.*

## Previous attempts to solve the issue:

**African Union's Plan of Action on Drug Control:** The goal of this framework was to coordinate and facilitate the cooperation of all African states, improving national drug policies, increasing border security, and educating its citizens about the effects illicit drugs have. While this project did succeed in educating its people and fostering international cooperation among the African countries, its lack of funding and weak implementation made results scarce.

**International Naval Patrols:** The deployment of multinational naval forces has been significant in the deterrence of pirate attacks. Operations such as EU NAVFOR, Operation Atalanta, and Operation Ocean Shield have been pivotal and largely attributed to lowering successful piracy numbers within the Red Sea since 2012.

**Private Security Measures:** While the appraisal on such a matter is complex, it is largely agreed that Private Security Measures on vessels have contributed to lowering piracy rates in the Red Sea but have not been extensive enough to which point that vessels can entirely defend themselves against growingly innovative pirate forces.

**Best Management Practices (BMPs):** Best Management Practices, which are guidelines implemented by the shipping industry to mitigate piracy risks, include measures such as increased vigilance, secure anchorage areas, and installation of physical barriers on ships, and more. These measures have been rather effective in preventing boardings and hijackings; alas, it may be appraised that these new tactics are being adjusted accordingly by pirates.

## Possible solutions:

**The Establishment of Joint Task Forces:** Establishing joint task forces with participation from any willing regional or international navies may prove effective in establishing coordinated and strategic patrols of piracy hotspots to prevent further piracy and serve as a deterrent for tensions. Such task forces ideally may include countries which have not yet established formal naval operations in the Red Sea.

**Support for Economic Development and Stability:** Establishing investment for coastal communities, particularly in Yemen and Somalia, could provide economic opportunity in these areas, which would turn many away from the dangerous and illegal business of piracy and

instead contribute to development within their respective nations. With international support for such measures, this could provide strong motivation for many to leave piracy behind.

**International Peacekeeping Action in Yemen:** As one of the primary homelands of pirates in the Red Sea, the stability of Yemen's economy, government, and security situation could meaningfully address the root causes of Yemeni pirate action, providing safer business within Yemen and discouraging the acts of piracy. United Nations peacekeeping forces may endeavour to intervene in ongoing Yemeni conflicts in seek of peace and prosperity in the nation, reducing tensions and piracy if executed successfully.

**Enhanced International Legal Cooperation:** Encouraging international cooperation in legal matters, especially extradition agreements, can ensure that pirates are prosecuted fully for their crimes regardless of where they were captured.

**Enhanced Community Education and Involvement:** Addressing this issue with local matters, the United Nations can choose to allocate resources to education and awareness campaigns in coastal regions to inform communities about the dangers and consequences of piracy. These campaigns can promote new paths for civilians away from piracy. Similarly, the United Nations may provide local communities with resources to establish community watch programs and reporting systems for suspicious activities. Empowering citizens to take part in security measures can establish a national identity against piracy through a sense of ownership and responsibility.

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