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The Accidental Pirate: Reassessing the Legitimacy of Counterpiracy Operations

STEPHEN ANNING AND M. L. R. SMITH

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With the collapse of central authority in the wake of the Cold War's end, Somalia became a prime example of a failed state. One of the symptoms of this state's failure has been the emergence of piracy off the Somali Coast. Sporadic incidents of piracy appeared almost immediately following Somalia's implosion in 1991. By 2006, however, a new and more organized piracy group emerged.¹ As a criminal start-up based in Somalia's Puntland region, the pirates have created a flourishing enterprise.² From a total of 18 incidents in 2006, there has been substantial growth in the number of piracy attacks on international shipping. In 2011, approximately 130 incidents were recorded. Another 68 assaults were committed beyond Somali territorial waters but widely ascribed to Somali piracy.³ By any measure such figures demonstrate a serious and growing security problem off the East African Coast.

Piracy, of course, presents itself as an essentially maritime problem. What, then, might be considered the relevance of this article for a journal that is ostensibly devoted to matters related to land warfare and broader security issues on *terra ferma*? More than might be imagined, because security problems at sea are invariably reflections of political problems on land. Perceiving an issue like Somali piracy solely in maritime terms, to be dealt with by navies or coast guards, is seeing the symptoms rather than the essence of the problem.

Contemporary commentary tends to analyze Somali piracy in a nautical fashion, primarily as a discrete maritime problem. For example, author Stig Hansen looks at the issue in terms of whether or not the Somali pirates constituted a putative coast guard force.⁴ Such arguments, and others like them, focus on piracy with little mention of Somalia's internal situation, particularly its

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political economy, which provides a more effective framework for counterpiracy recommendations. It is this factor, as much as how to deal with the symptoms, that needs to be understood. Thus, while piracy is clearly a criminal act, a lack of appreciation within operational and planning assumptions of the domestic factors that give rise to Somali piracy risk exacerbating, rather than remedying the problem. To establish this argument, British Army “Influence” doctrine—developed in Afghanistan—will be extended to an analysis and understanding of piracy. This framework will be discussed in relation to Somalia using a political economy analysis. It will, thereby, be possible to examine the broader efficacy of counterpiracy operations.

Current Counterpiracy Operations

The long-term success of counterpiracy operations should start with the assumption that piracy is a symptom of instability.⁵ Somali piracy is inextricably linked to the nation’s long-standing conflict. Unique to Somalia is a problem of sanctuary; it is the only place where vessels and hostages are often held *in situ* for long periods allowing for lengthy ransom negotiations.⁶ Therefore, while naval boarding operations and the capture and deportation of pirates to foreign courts can have a short-term effect,⁷ clearly they are unlikely to reduce the threat of piracy in the long-term. Naval interventions against the pirates might contain the number of assaults but ultimately they have little durable deterrent value. Equally problematic are military interventions on land whether by use of Special Operations Forces raids⁸ or airborne drones.⁹ These operations might achieve a desired tactical impact, but experience from other conflicts, notably Afghanistan, suggests that unintended consequences in terms of collateral damage on civilian centers are always a hazard. Although land-based military interventions and maritime boarding operations may be legal, they are just as likely to be seen as illegitimate in the view of the local populace and thus be of declining utility over the longer-term.

British Army Influence Operations in Afghanistan

In current NATO military operations in Afghanistan, the notion of “influence” is a burgeoning sphere of thought. Within the British Army, influence operations have been explicitly exercised in Afghanistan since Operation HERRICK 7 in 2006 and 2007. Described as “the guiding idea for the conduct of operations,”¹⁰ influence measures seek to use Target Audience Analysis (TAA) to understand conflict zones.¹¹ The key to successful TAA is the appreciation that not all adversaries are political enemies and therefore a more broad range of responses beyond military direct action are required. One approach to TAA is termed “Shade-Shift,” which gained prominence in 2011 during Operation HERRICK 12.¹² Shade-Shift has obviously been developed for land-based counterinsurgencies whereas piracy is a maritime criminal endeavor. Transposing the concept to a maritime context, however, provides for a more nuanced understanding of piracy that reveals, inasmuch as the act of piracy is

criminal, its underlying premises are that of an enterprise—a venture designed for commercial purposes by its participants. Analyzing Somali piracy as an enterprise using the Shade-Shift approach yields interesting results for how to identify the adversary and the implications for current antipiracy operations.

The Piracy Enterprise

The first task in applying TAA principles to Somali piracy as an enterprise is to determine who has an interest in the piracy's operation.¹³ In current parlance, it is necessary to identify "stakeholders." As criminal activity is generally economically driven, stakeholders can be recognized using a financial analysis to determine the motivation of each actor using a Shade-Shift approach. The Shade-Shift approach is an evolving understanding within defense intelligence analysis that provides a more grounded, contextual understanding of the complex spectrum of actors within a conflict zone. Once this is achieved, it will then be possible to discuss the legitimacy of counterpiracy operations in light of the findings.

One study concluded that global piracy costs between \$7 billion and \$12 billion per year, much of which is attributable to Somalia.¹⁴ Those costs are incurred by shipping companies, governments, and consumers. When compared to a worldwide maritime commerce worth \$12.2 trillion, a mere \$7 to \$12 billion perhaps does not seem significant.¹⁵ Considering these costs are, however, mostly borne by shipping owners directly through ransom, insurance, rerouting, and deterrence equipment, the micro-level costs are extensive and cause much greater problems.¹⁶ If, as a consequence of increased security expenditure, costs to shipping companies become too burdensome, they will likely find alternative, though inevitably more expensive, routes resulting in decreased consumer demand for the product being shipped. Inexorably, this will have many negative effects down the supply and production chain. As long as Somalia's piracy enterprise grows, the costs will increase and shipping owners will bear the consequence.

Equally problematic is measuring the economic cost to Somalia itself. Although accurate data is hard to come by, it is clear the influx of money generated by piracy into Somalia's unregulated economy has drastically inflated the cost of food and other commodities.¹⁷ Piracy also threatens the delivery of vital humanitarian assistance—valued at \$800 million¹⁸—for the provision of commodities to the Horn of Africa, much of which arrives by sea. Demand for this aid is high: the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) estimates that 6 million people in East Africa are aid dependant, 2.6 million of which are Somali.¹⁹ Fishing is a mainstay of Somalia and the threat of pirate attacks has forced many boat captains to refuse to sail causing prices to "skyrocket."²⁰ Again, we see that the threat is not restricted to sea because violent piratical networks are just as capable of threatening the Somali populace on land.²¹ Measuring the social costs to Somalia is difficult but it is evident that piracy can stultify legitimate—nonpiracy based—economic and social development within Somalia.

While piracy may be costly for some communities, it is a profitable business for others. One report describes these beneficiaries using a comparative analysis of satellite imagery of Somali towns in order to understand how piracy-based economic development has evolved. The images suggest an interesting story that demonstrates how piracy can lead to prosperity in discrete communities. According to the report's author, Anja Shortland, "Piracy appears to lead to widespread economic development and therefore has a large interest group behind its continuation."²²

The revenue generation for this interest group is predominantly through ransom revenue. Figures vary depending on the source, but it is estimated that in 2006 the average ransom was around \$150,000. By 2011 this figure is believed to have increased to around \$3.4 million²³ or \$4.5 to \$5 million, yielding revenue of \$177 million per year²⁴ or \$400 million over the last five years.²⁵ This is significant income. In the mind of the beneficiary communities, this is legitimate finance.

Beyond these communities there are direct and indirect beneficiaries who are often described as illegitimate. Describing the pirates as Somali is accurate. The "Somali Piracy" label, though, does not reflect the entire situation. Large parts of the Somali piracy enterprise are believed to function within a web of transnational networks²⁶ and are commanded externally by "Godfathers" from Gulf States who, as direct sponsors, finance hijacking and approve the distribution of profit from ransoms.²⁷ Further, although links between al Shabaab and Somali piracy are speculative,²⁸ it is not hard to envisage that, through black markets and smuggling networks in Somalia, the two groups are not in some respects indirect beneficiaries from each others' presence.²⁹ This is especially true as there are numerous suggestions of burgeoning links between al Shabaab and al Qaeda.³⁰ Whether through direct-benefit as a "Godfather" or indirect-benefit via violent jihadist organizations and networks, it is not just discrete communities in Somalia who prosper from piracy.

According to the author Sam Bateman, it is also an "inconvenient truth" that other, perfectly legal, groups benefit from piracy, most obviously private security companies hired to protect ships.³¹ For a long time the precise legal position of these guards has been uncertain,³² but after years of opposition, many governments are looking to provide or license armed guards on vessels. In October 2011, for example, Prime Minister David Cameron announced the ending of the United Kingdom's opposition to ship-borne private security detachments. Such developments have been seen as heralding the "privatization of Naval force."³³ Surveys estimate that privatized naval protection amounts to some \$680 million each year.³⁴ When combined with deterrence equipment and vessel upgrades, the estimate varies between \$363 million to \$2.5 billion.³⁵ What separates private companies from criminal networks as profiteers in this enterprise is the issue of legitimacy: provided that government legislation is deemed to be lawful and private military companies (PMC) are law-abiding, this financial benefit can be regarded as legitimate.

component of this legitimacy calculation. The required expenditure must be prioritized against other governmental priorities. In a democratic state it is (at least in principle) an electorate who will decide how the balance between humanitarian assistance and intervention expenditure is struck, which introduces the requirement for “conflict sensitive” journalism.

The shading in Figure 1 enables an appreciation of the legitimacy issue. Those groups and their associated activities in the light-shaded areas can be seen as legitimate; those in the darker areas might be deemed illegitimate. Many activities, of course, fall into a gray area between the two. The center point can be taken to represent those in Somalia who are unaffected by piracy, while the bottom center signifies those for whom piracy has no financial impact, but who nevertheless support claims that the pirates are guardians of Somali waters.³⁹ The dark-toned areas correspond to those who benefit from and support piracy but are not directly involved in pirate activity.⁴⁰ There may even be some who believe their financial loss is a price worth paying to protect their country and can be represented at the bottom left of Figure 1. Legitimacy is, however, a problematic word. The shading in Figure 1 describes legitimacy from the point of view that piracy is criminal; the perspective for many people characterized on this diagram may be entirely different. Critically, it must be recognized that there are potentially more people in the gray area than in the black. While all the assertions of legitimacy of this paragraph are open to debate one fact remains—there is a debate.

Figure 1 also illustrates how each entity within the enterprise is linked, which enables the second and third order effects of counterpiracy operations to be analyzed. Understanding these effects permits an assessment of possible “unintended consequences.” For example, if the cost of hiring PMCs is too high for shipping owners and the threat from piracy too great, aid agencies will become less able to deliver aid and so communities will suffer. Accordingly, since pirates are drawn largely from Somalia’s coastal communities, fishermen who are less able to financially provide for their families may turn to piracy as a coping mechanism for survival and legitimize their activities with reference to the failure of foreign aid to alleviate their plight. This raises a crucial existential question to you, the reader of this article: As the primary breadwinner faced with the challenge of feeding the family in a country that cannot provide you with the legitimate means to do so, what would you do?

The polarized positioning of the entities within Figure 1 thus represents a rather binary analysis embodied in the commentary of those who either perceive Somalia’s pirates as purely criminal⁴¹ or dismiss the complex grievances that overlay this model.⁴² It has been suggested that many pirates may fall in the gray area of Figure 1 who turn to piracy because they have no other option. There may also be many who support the pirates but who do not directly participate in piracy. These two groups are potentially the “accidental pirates”⁴³ of Somalia. Any response to piracy, therefore, needs to account for this gray area and permit individuals to make a legitimate living in an otherwise conflict ridden and impoverished nation. Such an understanding contains implications,

some of them no doubt unpalatable, in terms of disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating pirates into Somali society. Notwithstanding the practical programs that may be required to reintegrate former pirates, the broad observations hold true—that an inadequate understanding of what gives rise to Somali piracy may lead to misguided interventions that risk not only drawing more people into accidental piracy but also further legitimizing the enterprise in the minds of the Somali people.

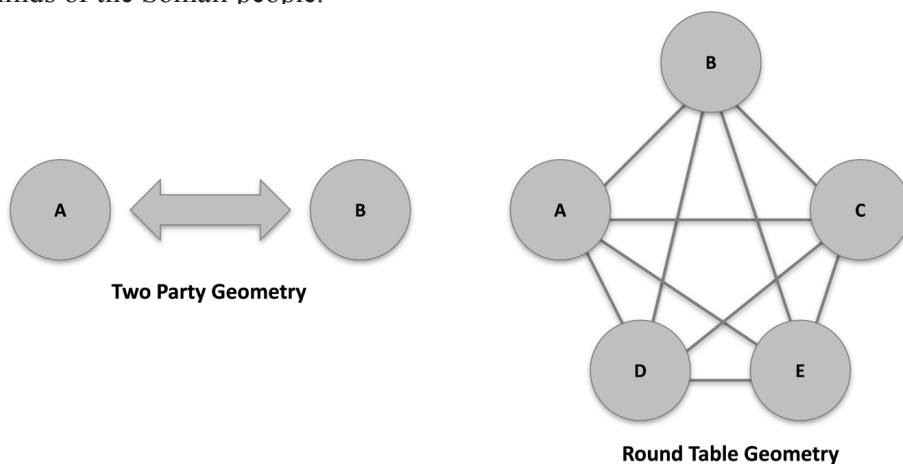


Figure 2. Conflict Analysis

To understand how Somali piracy can be misdiagnosed, we can turn to work by the Peace and Conflict Journalism (Pecojon) Network, which provides a useful explanation. In an effort to promote conflict sensitive journalism, Pecojon describes the process by which oversimplified analyses of conflict can dominate more intricate realities.⁴⁴ Taken from research by Johan Galtung, Pecojon uses the Two Party Geometry model from Figure 2 to illustrate oversimplified analysis that perceives conflict in terms of a binary analysis of “good vs. bad” and where the only possible outcomes are “victory” or “defeat.”⁴⁵ The Round Table Geometry model in Figure 2 illustrates the more challenging reality whereby the stakeholders of a conflict are identified and described by their interests, which helps to explain their motivation. Much of the reporting on piracy falls into the Two Party Geometry model, which oversimplifies analysis and leads to misunderstandings of a more complex picture. With this new understanding of the pirates, it is now necessary to analyze Somalia’s political economy.

Somalia’s Political Economy

Examining the underlying premises of Somalia’s conflict indicates the extent to which piracy can be viewed as a symptom of the nation’s internal challenges. As Professor Mats Berdal points out, much analysis after the Cold War generally rationalized the causes of conflict in failed states by focusing on an actor’s grievances.⁴⁶ A notable World Bank research program led by Professor

of Economics at Oxford University Paul Collier,⁴⁷ however, challenged these motives, finding that grievance factors had little bearing on the character of a conflict.⁴⁸ The study concluded that greed, not grievance, motivations were key factors in the outbreak of conflict.⁴⁹ The ensuing “Greed vs. Grievance” debate demonstrated how the political economy of war could be mapped. Since conflict zones create alternative systems of power and profit,⁵⁰ then by understanding that violence offers economic incentives it is possible to locate the beneficiaries of violence and determine why they might be motivated to sustain the conflict.⁵¹ Based on this analysis, it is possible to identify the informal and illicit shadow economies of a conflict zone on which the political structures of governance are built and to determine their legitimacy.

The political economy approach seeks to comprehend armed conflict through the interaction of greed and grievances.⁵² While socioeconomic, ethnic, or political grievances may spur a conflict, access to economic resources (greed) often becomes a salient factor in the subsequent dynamics of the violence. These factors will have an important impact on the duration, intensity, and character of conflict.⁵³ In relation to piracy, this analysis reveals that “where economic governance by the state is weak or absent, the greater is the size and relative importance of informal or shadow economies.”⁵⁴ In the context of Somali piracy, profits from ransom are the primary resource within its shadow economy. Hence, in a condition where central authority is enfeebled and unable to provide for or govern its people, illicit activities emerge as coping mechanisms for survival. Thus, based on a political economy analysis, it can be reasonably inferred some Somalis turn to piracy to generate income in an environment where they would otherwise perish. Interacting with the economic agendas are long-standing “narratives of grievance,”⁵⁵ which serve as justification for the enterprise’s existence. The notion of pirates serving as protectors of Somalia’s fishing stocks—functioning as a putative coast guard—is one example of a grievance narrative.

Notwithstanding the troubled political economy of Somalia, it should also be noted the 2004 tsunami had a devastating effect, especially in the Puntland region. Along the 650 kilometer stretch of coastland, the United Nations estimates that 45,000 people were affected with over 200 people killed.⁵⁶ A World Health Organization (WHO) report concluded that approximately 22,000 people would require sustained resource transfer in the form of food and assistance.⁵⁷ It is not unreasonable to assume, therefore, Somali piracy and the 2004 tsunami are somehow linked. The people of Puntland turned to piracy as a means to generate economic development in an environment that was devastated by the tsunami. This understanding offers a degree of mitigation as to why people may engage in piracy.

It should be clear, then, that studies which accentuate the problem purely as one of criminality or solely as a maritime issue are insufficient explanations of Somali piracy. While the piracy may have started as a rudimentary coast guard, it is now inextricably linked to Somalia’s internal conflict and functions

as a shadow economy. Accordingly, debunking the coast guard myth does not conceptually or legitimately represent the complexity of the pirates' motivation.

Analyzing the "accidental" nature of Somalia's pirates offers a more realistic appreciation of the complexities. To capture the diverse interests and motivations of those functioning in a shadow economy, a political economy analysis conceptualizes individual actors as conflict "entrepreneurs," "opportunists," and "dependants."⁵⁸ Entrepreneurs are described as those for whom conflict has become an end in itself because of the economic power and prestige it brings. Opportunists are those for whom armed conflict affords opportunities for enrichment. Dependants are depicted as those for whom the functioning of a war economy at the local level will primarily be a matter of coping or just surviving. It is the opportunists and dependants who most readily fall into the category of Somalia's accidental pirates. Assessing conflict actors in this manner enables important policy implications to be derived.

- "Godfathers" and gang leaders can be described as conflict entrepreneurs. Here, conflict legitimizes their piracy enterprise, acts that would otherwise be punishable as a crime by a functioning state in peacetime. Pirate activity is the end in itself, while conflict is the means to the ends.⁵⁹ Military interdiction may be appropriate to counter entrepreneurs.

- Discrete communities that benefit from piracy along with low-level members of piracy gangs might be described as opportunists. Opportunists may view piracy as normative behavior in a society that is strongly influenced by "warrior culture"—involvement in piracy may even confer an elevated social status. Opportunists may view military actions by outside actors against them as an escalation of violence which could lead to predation of vulnerable households to recoup income. In pursuing criminal proceedings, an opportunist's community would have to agree that pirates are criminals. Without this agreement, criminal proceedings may only reinforce a pirate's elevated social status. To offset the influence of this complex group, military action and development programs may be appropriate.

- Dependants can describe those for whom Somalia's long-standing conflict has given no option other than piracy as a mechanism for survival. This group can be viewed as victims of the violence and the destructive nature of war, and they are the ones most likely to flee and become refugees. Dependents may even view incarceration in foreign prisons as a more favorable option to life in Somalia. Those who subscribe to this view would see military and criminal action as inappropriate.

Offering development aid to opportunists or dependants is unlikely to find favor with critics who advocate a hard-line regarding piracy, especially those who adhere to the belief that all of Somalia's pirates are criminals. In doing so, however, one might be providing a long-term legitimate solution.

Legitimacy

Based on the concepts detailed above, imposing uniform criminal justice solutions onto this piracy enterprise is likely to jeopardize the legitimacy

of any external intervention in the minds of many Somalis. Although conducted with the best of intentions, such interventions have a poor track record. For example, only 4 percent of the \$1.6 billion allocated under the United Nations Operation in Somalia's (UNOSOM) program in the early 1990s made its way into Somalia's economy. Instead, the money merely enriched the country's warlords, who used the opportunity to further ravage the economy and society.⁶⁰ Moreover, the disaster which followed al Shabaab's 2007 insurgency against Ethiopia's intervention into Mogadishu—described by the UN as “the world's worst humanitarian crisis”—provoked fury towards Ethiopia, the United States, and the United Nations among Somalia's people.⁶¹ Additionally, according to reports released by international agencies such as the United Nations Environment Program, Greenpeace, and other environmental organizations, foreign companies have used Somalia extensively as a dumping ground for highly toxic waste with its attendant adverse health effects.⁶² If legitimacy is “the normative acceptance and expectation by a political community that the cluster of rules and institutions that compose the state ought to be obeyed,”⁶³ it is likely that many Somalis have a skeptical appreciation of international norms of criminal justice. Consequently, intervention operations carry the risk of politicizing entrepreneurs and opportunists who might have been criminally motivated but could be invested with political legitimacy as representatives of the population. Given that Somalia functions as sanctuary for some of the most active violent jihadist groups such as al Shabaab, the danger to the country's internal political structure is obvious.

Although Somalia has been without an effective government since 1991, it is not without governance. The competing systems for justice in Somalia are comprised of a decentralized local governance from blood payment groups and customary justice, and centralized governance from Sharia law and a weak Transitional Federal Government, the influence of which is largely confined to Mogadishu.⁶⁴ Drawing on other theaters of conflict as disparate as Northern Ireland and Afghanistan, one writer concludes that it is “the ability to resolve disputes [justice] which essentially defines legitimacy” in conflict zones.⁶⁵ Justice systems imposed by foreign intervention are likely either to be dismissed or viewed as irrelevant, further eroding any leverage foreign powers and agencies may have. Consequently, to confer legitimacy, foreign courts need a strong understanding of Somalia's internal political and social conditions when dealing with Somalia pirates.

This brief analysis of the delicate process of building legitimacy shows the pursuit of criminal proceedings needs to take into account Somalia's political and economic status. Accordingly, entrepreneurs of piracy can be considered legitimate targets for military action. Opportunists and dependants may *a priori* appear to be legitimate targets, but a more in-depth analysis reveals they are not necessarily the main instigators of criminal activity. Imposing military action against these groups, therefore, may have the long-term unintended consequence of politicizing supporters of piracy and delegitimizing counterpiracy operations. The political economic approach and Shade-Shift

concepts are based on years of research and experience in Afghanistan. They overwhelmingly support the position that the application of military force alone is insufficient for long-term success in conflict zones. These well-documented challenges based on contemporary experience demonstrate this assertion. To not transpose this reasoning as a methodology for analyzing Somalia's conflict, of which piracy is a symptom, will only lead to the repetition of past mistakes and further undermine the legitimacy of external intervention.

Conclusion

Taking a cue from British Army "Influence Doctrine" that was developed in Afghanistan, this study offers new insight into Somalia's pirates by applying the Shade-Shift approach. It suggests a new approach to understanding the motives of those involved in piracy as an entry point for more in-depth analysis. The concept of conflict entrepreneurs, opportunists, and dependants shows there are some within the piracy network who might have reasonable mitigation for their involvement. Finally, the long-term legitimacy of foreign intervention will be decided by the accuracy of who is targeted and whether a justice system sufficiently accounts for the context of Somalia's complex political economy.

As with the British Army's recent Afghanistan experience, to achieve long-term legitimacy in Somalia, counterpiracy operations need to be synchronized with land-based development programs using the cross-government approach. Figure 1 provides an understanding of how actions can have unintended consequences in areas not intentionally targeted. So, while this article in some respects highlights complexity without necessarily offering practical solutions, the overriding assertion is to reanalyze Somali piracy with a greater understanding of the second and third order effects on the political economy before undertaking any ill-advised actions that merely compound Somalia's predicament; otherwise such actions merely create self-fulfilling prophecies. Unfortunately, development programs that benefit piracy dependants and opportunists may be unpalatable to many in the international community. This is especially true for those who rationalize conflict using the two-party geometry model. The ability to challenge prevailing assumptions by overcoming short-term approaches, embracing complexity, and accepting hard truths will ultimately result in legitimate long-term counterpiracy responses. And in facing these challenges, "conflict sensitive journalism" is a means to achieve a more informed "legitimacy calculation" for governmental prioritization. The broader practical solution comes down to an obvious, but often unpracticed, suggestion. As it is in Afghanistan, so it is with Somalia; in a troubled, socially complex environment it is effective cooperation between the development and security sectors that will, in the end, support the long-term legitimacy of foreign intervention.

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