



Confronting the challenge of piracy at sea

By Shada Islam

Forget romantic notions of pirates as swashbuckling heroes in search of treasure under the sea. Modern day sea piracy is a criminal, highly-profitable and brutal profession which threatens global trade as well as international security.

With a large percentage of Asia-Europe trade dependent on maritime transport, combating sea piracy is a common challenge for governments in both regions. The ASEM summit in Brussels on October 4-5 offers Asia-Europe leaders an ideal platform for crafting a common, ground-breaking agenda to tackle the growing problem.

It will not be easy. Pirates have long operated around the Gulf of Aden, between Yemen and Somalia, the Gulf of Guinea, near Nigeria and the Niger River Delta, the busy Malacca Straits between Indonesia and Malaysia, and in the seas between India and Sri Lanka. Modern-day pirates, with their speed boats, sophisticated weaponry and hunger for money, pose a threat to trade and security on some of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

The United Nations says 111 pirate attacks took place last year in the sea corridor linking the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean, representing an increase of nearly 200 percent over 2007. On any given day, about 30 to 40 warships from the European Union, NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) and the United States as well as China, Russia, India, Malaysia, South Korea and Japan are believed to be involved in counter-piracy efforts in the area. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has described the deployment as "one of the largest anti-piracy flotillas in modern history."

European Union foreign ministers have extended their EUNAVFOR Atalanta mission, launched in December 2008 and counting up to 12 ships and patrol aircraft supplied by Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Spain, Belgium, Luxembourg and Greece, as well as non-EU member Norway, until December 2012. Atalanta patrols the Gulf of Aden and Somali Basin waters in conjunction with other anti-piracy missions operated by NATO, India, Russia and China.

Atalanta's task is to protect ships delivering humanitarian aid to Somalia and to deter, disrupt and arrest pirates they encounter at sea. Most of the other international ships in the area either concentrate on escorting convoys of their own national vessels or spread themselves across the region to protect all shipping regardless of flag.

There is no overall commander for the different national missions although the navies meet once a month in Bahrain and coordinate through an Internet chat room. Their patrols are backed by Security Council resolutions and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which defines piracy as illegal acts committed on the high seas for private ends.

The surge in patrols, however, does not seem to have curtailed the growing piracy industry. Despite the risks of weather, high seas and being picked up by a foreign warship, Somalis continue to be tempted by the prospect of receiving multimillion dollar ransoms. Somali pirates are believed to net more than 100 million dollars a year, an astronomical sum for a war-racked country whose economy is in tatters.

Still, Europeans are getting tougher. Five Somali pirates were recently sentenced to five years in prison by a Dutch court in Europe's first trial for piracy at sea in modern times. A judge in Rotterdam found the men, aged between 25 and 45, guilty on the 300-year-old charge of sea robbery for their part in a failed attempt to hijack a ship off the Somali coast.

The potential for greater Asia-Europe cooperation to tackle piracy at sea is enormous. At their talks in Brussels at the ASEM 8 meeting, Asian and European leaders should take an overall view of the threat and decide on areas where they can further enhance their cooperation and act jointly to deal with the problem.

ASEM leaders, for example, should look at the state of international legal cooperation on piracy and the need for stronger domestic legislation. They may also consider the creation of a maritime peacekeeping force for Somalia. Asian and European governments can also exchange experiences and the lessons they have learned as regards military action at sea and look at prospects for enhanced coordination and cooperation, exit strategies as well as the involvement of the private sector to disseminate and apply self-protection measures against pirate attacks.

Discussions should focus on regional capacity-building in order to allow states to actively pursue pirates. Asia and Europe also need to exchange views on the principle of paying ransom and how best to trace and chart the financial proceeds of piracy and recover ransom money. Ways of turning public opinion against pirates in countries like Somalia where they have destabilized local communities by introducing violence, crime, weapons and drugs, should be considered.

The root causes of piracy, including the grinding poverty in states such as Somalia, must be addressed. The EU for instance combines its Atlanta naval operation with a training mission designed to strengthen the Somali security forces. The EU also provides extensive development assistance to its population, supporting, for instance, the setting up of democratic institutions and access to education. Asian governments can engage in similar projects, either separately or jointly with Europe.

Given the high stakes, the fight against piracy should become an ASEM priority. Governments will have to put in great efforts in the political, military, economic, legal and law-enforcement domain to combat the problem. However, in an

interdependent world, failure to act together will lead to wider-ranging threats to stability and security, not only in the regions directly concerned by piracy but in other parts of the world.

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Note: **ASEM** was launched in 1996 as an informal forum for discussion between Asian and European countries. The current ASEM partners are: Austria, Belgium, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Laos, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mongolia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Romania, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, The Netherlands, The Philippines, United Kingdom, Vietnam, the ASEAN Secretariat and the European Commission.

Shada Islam is a journalist in Brussels with a long experience of EU-Asia relations. This is a part of a series of articles being published by "Particip" an independent, internationally-recognised consultancy, which is under contract to the European Commission, to look at different aspects of the multi-faceted Asia-Europe relationship. Other articles of the series can be found on the ASEM 8 website: <http://www.asem8.be/related-documentation>. This article represents the views of the author and does not commit the European Commission in any way.

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