

Just three years ago, if a ship or boat was targeted by a Somali pirate gang, the odds were that it would likely face capture. Of the 111 'incidents' (attempts at hijacking a vessel) in the region around the Horn of Africa and Gulf of Aden which were reported to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) piracy reporting centre, 42 became successful hijackings. That's a hit rate for the pirates of just under 40%. In 2009 those figures had dropped to a success rate of just over 21% with 49 hijackings although the number of attacks had increased to 217. IMB figures up to 27 September this year show that there have been 24 hijackings from 194 incidents - a success rate for the pirates of just over 12%. However, around this time prevailing weather conditions in the region are favourable for pirates so those numbers are almost certain to rise.

Despite the drop in the amount of successful hijackings, a worrying development is an increase in the level of violence pirates are prepared to use against crews, with this year seeing the first deaths of hostages since the current spate of piracy began. Former captives also report being tortured, methods used have reportedly included crew members being beaten or sometimes even forced to strip naked before being put into a deep-freeze for 30 minutes.

As more attacks are reaping fewer prizes for the pirates, the stakes as well as ransoms are rising. Whereas previously it was unlikely that Somali pirates would kill their hostages, worryingly since the deaths of four Americans earlier in 2011, murder no longer seems an unlikely outcome.

As for how to deal with this, the answer would seem to be deceptively straightforward: stop pirates boarding vessels. Back in 2009, the IMB's director, Captain Pottengal Mukundan said: "The international navies play a critical role in the prevention of piracy in Somalia and it is vital that they remain." At the time, the international community had just begun to take Somali piracy seriously. The US had deployed a special sub-group of its Coalition Maritime Forces task force to focus on bringing under control the growing problem. In conjunction with its partners, the US created the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC) in the Gulf of Aden to provide safe passage to ships transiting one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. To a certain extent it has worked. Although attacks have not stopped in the Gulf of Aden, they have been at least significantly reduced.

The flip side of its success however is that pirates have moved further out into the Somali basin and beyond. This has created a fresh problem for the international community - the new theatre of operations is massive, larger than western Europe. Pirate attacks are being reported closer to the coast of India than Africa. The US was joined by the EU and NATO, though these combined efforts are barely containing the current number of attacks. It is virtually impossible for the existing military operations, involving at best five ships, to patrol the area. As Captain Keith Blount, chief of staff for the EU's NAVFOR force, has put it, "it's like patrolling the whole of the western European land mass with four or five police cars".

One source estimates that the number of pirates is increasing by around 30% per year (captures and arrests notwithstanding) but as western military budget cuts bite it's unlikely in the future naval task forces will be increased accordingly. But clearly it's not just the presence of

international navies which is having an impact on the amount of successful hijackings. Industry best practices as well as more controversial developments such as the employment of armed security teams on ships have also likely contributed to stemming the escalation in the level of hijackings. The often repeated line that no ship with armed guards has been successfully pirated does not take into account the fact that when those teams disembark as the ship nears land (and therefore hits legal complications involving arms import controls) it is again vulnerable again to attack, albeit now within a national jurisdiction.

According to those who have taken part in anti-piracy operations, the best defence a ship has is speed. If a ship can make 15 knots and has a relatively high freeboard, it's almost certainly safe. Perhaps what is needed is better training of ships' masters to be prepared to brazen it out, put the vessel at full speed and head away. Given that pirates are usually armed with AK-47s or RPGs which they routinely use when approaching their target, captains' reluctance to simply speed away is understandable bearing in mind they have the safety of themselves and their crews to consider.

Some vessels are easy targets for pirates. Laden tankers for example typically have very low freeboards of only a few feet which even taking into account choppy sea conditions makes them relatively simple to board. Here, changes to ship design might be effective, perhaps the incorporation of a 'cage' along particularly low parts of the ship could be an effective deterrent. This feature is already being used on many new cruise ships.

It is also worth remembering that sometimes, sea conditions can count against attackers and it is this factor which has typically seen less pirate activity during the region's two monsoon seasons. Boarding at sea is much more complex than it would at first appear. Say the sea state is at one or two and the target ship is travelling at 12 knots, if a pirate crew is in small skiff doing 20 knots to try and catch up with the target vessel and is trying to board using a ladder and a grappling hook, capture is very difficult. After around 20 minutes, pirates are likely to give up and try an easier target.

A relatively recent development has been the introduction of unmanned aerial vehicles, more commonly known as drones, to monitor the ocean and mainland for pirates. The UK police are to send a team to the Seychelles (where some US drone squads are based) where they will reportedly work on tackling the financial side of piracy and attempt to interdict the so-called pirate kingpins who fund the lucrative missions.

Although the number of attacks relative to the volume of maritime traffic is small, the trauma experienced by innocent seafarers held hostage by ruthless gangs as well as the costs to global commerce and aid programmes mean it is a problem which should continue to be a focus for international governments.

What is clear is that there is no single strand solution to countering Somali-based piracy. All of the above as well as continued international co-operation and intelligence sharing are needed. Realistically it is unlikely that piracy will be eradicated, even if peace eventually comes to Somalia, but that does not mean efforts to contain it are futile. What is needed above all is long-term international political commitment.

BREAKING NEWS : As we posted this, the MoD announced that the RFA Fort Victoria, currently on NATO counter piracy operations east of Suez, responded to calls to assist a pirated Italian merchant ship, the MVMontecristo, along with an American Navy frigate. "Due to the presence of the warships, 11 suspected pirates on board the pirated vessel surrendered without force. A Royal Naval boarding team carried out a compliant boarding of the vessel and the suspected pirates are being detained," said a spokesman.

The Foreign Office has announced developments in the UK's role in the international fight against piracy off the Horn of Africa. There was confirmation that the current government policy which strongly discourages the use of armed security guards on ships is to change - at least for the short term. Foreign Office minister Henry Bellingham said: "I want to underline that we are not doing this lightly. We are planning for the arming of ships to be a temporary measure only. It is a response to the extraordinary circumstances in which we now find ourselves." Interestingly, although the government clearly now supports armed guards on boats, Mr Bellingham made clear that the government will take a hands-off approach to the regulation and monitoring of companies who may offer maritime security services. It will be up to shipping companies and the old adage caveat emptor to decide who to employ.

There is also a plan to send officers from the UK's Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) to the Seychelles (lucky them) to work on derailing the financing network underpinning Somali piracy. SOCA's mission is to locate and root out the so-called kingpins, the financiers whose backing makes many piracy missions possible. To help tackle the problem onshore, the government is committing £2m to community engagement, where there will be a push to dissuade Somalis from engaging in the pirate industry. This will be coupled with a "small scale but high impact programmes to offer real alternatives to piracy". The details of this are yet to be released.