



Photo courtesy of Maritime Security Review

## Somalia: Looking to History and Geography for a Solution

Lieutenant Commander Matthew Noland  
United States Navy

**P**iracy off the Horn of Africa brought Somalia into the collective conscience of western observers, offering a glimpse into the chronic instability and corruption that reigned there for decades. The piracy generally has been suppressed, and Somalia has established an internationally recognized federal government for the first time in nearly twenty years. Suppressing piracy and establishing a legitimate government are important steps towards stabilization, but Somalia cannot solve its problems without international

---

*The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within /luce.nt/ are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Naval War College, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense or any other branch or agency of the U.S. Government.*

support. Beset with issues of corruption, clan-based rivalry, and near total economic collapse, the path to sustainable stability for Somalia is fraught with difficulties of prioritization. Unless the international community can help, Somalia is likely to slide back into chaos. There are many ways the United States, and particularly United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), might engage the problem. Tailoring American engagement to Somalia's maritime character and geo-strategic position offers a logical starting point with short-term and long-term potential. Somalia is a maritime nation. Establishing a capable coast guard is a logical step towards general stability for Somalia and serves American regional security interests as well. AFRICOM should commit to the establishment and growth of a credible indigenous coastal patrol and interdiction capability as its first priority in Somalia.

In the last twenty years, Somalia has become "the infamous poster child of state failure; the world's collapsed state *par excellence*,"<sup>1</sup> and "the most failed state on the planet."<sup>2</sup> After having maintained a modicum of control over Somalia's clan-based society for 22 years, the despotic government of Major General Muhammad Siad Barre collapsed in 1991. Since then, Somalia has undergone an uninterrupted downward spiral, ravaged by civil war, corruption, and famine. The resultant instability facilitated the most infamous episode of maritime piracy in modern times as Somali pirates threatened global commerce and prompted the deployment of warships from around the globe to combat it.

In September of 2012, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud became the first president of the newly constituted Federal Government Somalia (SFG). Greeted with optimism both internally and abroad, this milestone marked the end of Somalia's absence in the international system and was an important step towards reconciling the general chaos that reigned. President Mohamud was elected in a transparent process and conscientiously selected technocrats and professionals as his cabinet members rather than clan leaders and discredited former politicians.<sup>3</sup> The SFG is surrounded by a domestic and international "feel good factor" that lent it, at least initially, an immediate credibility.<sup>4</sup> For the first time in decades, Somalia has been recognized by the United Nations and the United States of America.

Many factors contributing to instability in Somalia are common to other fragile states. Somalia is plagued by poverty and lack of economic opportunity. Corrupt elites are coupled with a general lack of public services and a weak internal security apparatus. The legitimacy of the government is questioned by many factions inside Somalia, and external intervention by foreign militaries remains well above average, even for the most beleaguered states in the index.<sup>5</sup> Add to this laundry list the episodic civil war and famine over the last twenty years. Clearly, Somalia is one of the weakest and least stable countries in the world and needs help from the international community in a myriad of arenas in order to make progress towards stability.

Besides the general security issues posed by a weak Somalia, one need only look at the piracy that blossomed into a full scale crisis to see how Somalia's instability affected the rest of the world. Long part of a trade route of critical value to European commerce and access to the Orient, the importance of the sea lane through the Gulf of Aden has grown exponentially since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.<sup>6</sup> Today, over 20,000 ships pass through it each year, transporting in excess of 12 percent of the world's daily oil supply.<sup>7</sup> While the United States may not rely on this oil directly, many trading partners do. As Royal Canadian Navy Admiral Robert Davidson writes,

Shipping represents an area of economic vulnerability. . . The operations area of CTF 150 comprises a region through which roughly two thirds of the world's oil moves. Although we may not rely on this source for Canadian oil, it is critical to our trading partners. Safe and unhindered

navigation through this region's waters is critical to the economies of the west, including Canada, and thus our contribution to this international coalition force is not simply about altruism, or doing the right thing. Given our economic reliance on trade, worldwide maritime security is also about self-interest.<sup>8</sup>

Given the circumstances outlined above, it is not surprising that General Rodriguez has made security in Somalia a specific priority for AFRICOM.<sup>9</sup> With such an array of problems, prioritization might seem overwhelming. The history (recent and ancient) and culture of Somalia provide clear guidance. Somalia is a maritime state possessing strategic maritime geography and boasts the longest coastline on the continent at nearly 2000 miles.<sup>10</sup>

Piracy reinforces Somalia's connection to the sea. When the going got rough, thousands of Somali mariners traded in their fishing gear for "pirate paraphernalia," and in the words of the seminal American naval strategist, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Somali's followed the sea, as they have done for centuries.<sup>11</sup> As Somalia is a maritime state, it follows that a maritime security capacity for Somalia would pay economic dividends far beyond the suppression of piracy. A Somali coast guard is a perfect vehicle for maritime security.

Prior to the collapse of the state, Somalia's fishing industry was small but thriving and showed enormous potential for growth.<sup>12</sup> Somali fishermen are outdone by foreign trawlers and have seen piracy as a lucrative alternative. Every fish caught illegally by foreign trawlers is revenue lost to a fragile Somali economy. A coastguard would help Somalia's economy by forcing foreign trawlers out of the EEZ and putting a Somali fishing industry back on its feet.

Besides fisheries, Somalia possesses undeveloped but potentially valuable port infrastructure and a great potential for offshore energy exploitation, neither of which help grow the Somali economy until Somalia can resolve its maritime security issues. The development of major ports and an offshore energy industry are both stated Somali maritime goals, but neither is attainable without a coast guard.<sup>13</sup>

Weak and failed states are bad for international security. This line of reasoning is articulated throughout foreign policy literature including the American National Security Strategy of 2002, which states, "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones."<sup>14</sup> Ungoverned spaces allow illegal trade and activity to flourish and have provided a base of operation for violent terrorist networks like Al Qaeda. Weak states often cannot provide for their own security and thus allow themselves to be preyed upon by other powers, potentially destabilizing entire regions. Finally, in an increasingly connected global economy, an interruption in trade that might have affected a limited number of players in centuries past, now has the potential to affect the entire world. Dr. Derek Reveron articulates this point of view in his book, *Exporting Security*,<sup>15</sup> and it is a central theme in Martin Murphy's book, *Small Boats, Weak States, Dirty Money*.<sup>16</sup>

With its own coast guard, Somalia could take advantage of the lull in piracy and support nascent fishing, energy, and shipping industries. In addition to bringing in revenue to the Somali economy, these industries would provide job opportunities to Somalia's mariners, who have shown what they will do when opportunities for employment are scarce. Economic prosperity and rising employment rates would account for a distinct security dividend for Somalia, relying on maritime security but separate from it. A Somali coast guard would essentially pay double for Somalia. It would provide maritime security, which Somalia sorely needs, and would also allow offshore industry the chance to flourish. Not

only would a coast guard contribute to Somali internal security and regional stability, benefitting everyone, but it would inhibit those looking to capitalize on instability.

Somalia needs its own coast guard, and AFRICOM should find a way to assist in its development. In the short term, an indigenous maritime security capability would let Somalia take charge of its own maritime law enforcement. A capable coast guard would allow Somalia to prevent a recrudescence of piracy and illegal exploitation of fisheries by other national fishing fleets. Somalia should not have to rely on naval coalitions for law enforcement. Operation Atalanta, the European anti-piracy coalition, will stand down in 2016, and CTF-151 ships are needed elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> The benefits of a capable Somali coast guard to American security are plain. If Somalia could police her own waters then the United States and allies would not have to.

Recognizing the need, several donor nations have attempted to establish Somali maritime security forces by hiring private contractors for training over the last several years. These efforts have generally failed for two reasons. First, a top-down approach has bred resentment from semi-autonomous regions that see a centrally controlled coast guard as a threat to their own self-rule. Secondly, they have failed because of perceived corruption, as in the case of the Puntland region, where the president appointed his own son as the force commander.<sup>18</sup> If AFRICOM can lend the credibility of a Combatant Command behind the effort to build a coast guard for Somalia, then there may be some chance for success. In addition to providing maritime security for the region, a coast guard is an important step towards building Somalia into a more stable government. If AFRICOM factors in Somalia's centuries old aversion to centralized government, and couples capacity building efforts with ministerial level mentoring, a capable coast guard in Somalia could be a win for the Horn of Africa region and for international security. AFRICOM should continue its counter-terrorism mission conducted against Al-Shabaab in support of the SFG. That mission is important. However, if the goal is a stable Somalia, coercive power must be paired with the application of American soft-power.<sup>19</sup> Given undeniable factors of history and geography, building a Somali coast guard makes sense and also nests perfectly under the AFRICOM tenant of capacity building.

An unstable Somalia poses a regional security risk that cannot be ignored. AFRICOM should continue to address the issue, but the level of instability in Somalia makes finding a starting point difficult. Building an indigenous maritime security capability represents a tailored approach based in historical and geographic reality. A coast guard would pay dividends for Somalia and the region in the near term, with the potential for sustainability in the years to come.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul D. Williams, *Somalia in Responding to Conflict in Africa: The United Nations and Regional Organizations*, ed. Jane Boulden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 257.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Lennox, "Contemporary Piracy off the Horn of Africa," (Report prepared for the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute, Calgary, December 2008), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Matt Bryden, "Somalia Redux?: Assessing the New Somali Federal Government," (Report prepared for the CSIS Africa Program, Washington, August 2013), 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Fragile States Index, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/fragile-states-2014>

<sup>6</sup> For an eloquent review of the strategic importance placed on the Red Sea route by Great Britain prior to the opening of the canal see Gerald S. Graham, *The Politics of Naval Supremacy: Studies in British Maritime Ascendance*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), pp. 63 – 95.

- <sup>7</sup>, James Kraska and Brian Wilson, "Fighting Pirates: The Pen and the Sword," *World Policy Journal*, (Winter 2008/2009), 41.
- <sup>8</sup> Robert Davidson, "Modern Naval Diplomacy, A Practitioner's View," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 11, no. 1 – 2 (Fall/Winter 2008/2009), 12.
- <sup>9</sup> General David M. Rodriguez, Commander, United States Africa Command, *Posture Hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, U.S. Capitol Building, Washington D.C., March 6, 2014
- <sup>10</sup> Timothy Martin, "Maritime Piracy: Out of sight, Out of Mind," *Goorangai: Occasional Papers of the Royal Australian Naval Reserve Professional Studies Program*, vol.2 no.3, (August 2006). Available online at <http://www.navy.gov.au/w/images/GoorangaiVol2Number3.pdf>
- <sup>11</sup> "pirate paraphernalia" is the language recently used by Commander US Naval Forces, Central Command, providing justification for boarding and seizure by coalition warships operating against pirates in the subordinate Coalition Task Forces (CTF 150 and CTF-151). It refers to any combination of weapons, conspicuous fuel loads, ladders, grappling hooks etc. that fisherman would have no use for.
- <sup>12</sup> "Somalia: Potential Goldmine for Fisheries as Piracy Declines," *Irin Humanitarian News and Analysis*, December 14, 2012, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/97049/somalia-potential-goldmine-for-fishermen-as-piracy-declines>
- <sup>13</sup> Federal Government of Somalia, *Somali Maritime Resource and Security Strategy* (Mogadishu: FGS, 2013)
- <sup>14</sup> National Security Strategy of the United States, (Washington: The White House, 2002), <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/index.html>
- <sup>15</sup> Derek S. Reveron, *Exporting Security: International Engagement, Security Cooperation and the Changing Face of the U.S. Military*, (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2010).
- <sup>16</sup> Martin N. Murphy, *Small Boats, Weak States, Dirty Money: Piracy and Maritime Terrorism in the Modern World*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2009).
- <sup>17</sup> Eric Haun, "NATO Extends Somali Counter-piracy Mission to 2016," *Marine News Magazine*, June 4, 2014, <http://www.marinelink.com/news/counterpiracy-extends370476.aspx>
- <sup>18</sup> James Bridger, "Searching for a Somali Coast Guard," *Center for Maritime Security Online*, October 8, 2013, <http://cimsec.org/searching-somali-coastguard/7776>
- <sup>19</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, (Cambridge: Perseus Books Group, 2004), 8.