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Is piracy really defeated?

Recently the phenomenon of piracy, which had been severely threatening the East African coasts as well as some of the regional most important shipping trade lanes over the past decade, underwent a sharp decline. In fact, as a consequence of UNSCR 1816 [*UN Security Council Resolution 1816*, 2008], a multinational military mission has been operating since then in the waters of the Indian Ocean.

However, it cannot yet be said that piracy is completely eradicated: on the contrary «there are mounting concerns that the period of relative calm may be over» [Kieron Monks, *Piracy threat returns to African waters*, CNN, January 3, 2018] and that one could witness a renovated surge of maritime crime.

During the second phase of the Somali civil war, starting from 2005, the lack of a stable government and of a functional coastal guard in the region, not to mention the pervasive poverty, encouraged the rise of multiple armed robberies against ships off the coast of Somalia, in the Gulf of Aden and up north in the Red Sea.

Shortly piracy became a serious menace to trade, since the waters around the Bab el Mandeb choke point are of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. In the High Risk Area (HRA), the Somali piracy crisis reached its peak between 2008 and 2012, with daily highjacks.

The international military response consisted in the cooperation among three major task commitments – Operation Ocean Shield (NATO), Combined Task Force 151 (USA) and Operation Atalanta (EU) – and individual country contributors. In four years effective pirate attacks dwindled to zero.

Yet, immediately after, the international community's commitment was reduced. By the mid-December 2016 NATO formally concluded Operation Ocean Shield. The still ongoing EU Operation Atalanta decreased its efforts to cooperate with the other independent forces. Helped by a renewed period of geopolitical instability in the Horn of Africa, due to interregional conflicts over the management of water resources and to the influence of Gulf tensions, piracy restarted. Just in the first months of 2018, the Live Piracy Report of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Commercial Crime Services has

reported eighteen of attempted and hijacked vessels off the coasts of both Eastern and Western Africa [IMB Piracy & Armed Robbery Map 2018, ICC-Commercial Crime Services official website].

This situation can have different repercussions. In terms of piracy a neglected Somali situation could be compounded by a more acute one in the Gulf of Guinea. In terms of geopolitics the lack of coordination between the different task forces and the EU NAVFOR, operating in the Gulf of Aden, could facilitate the ever growing Chinese influence in the region.

In August 2017, indeed, China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has officially opened its first overseas military base in the port of Djibuti with the clear intention to ensure naval presence and control in a key area. Chinese ships will do their duty in favour of global trade and humanitarian activities, but the political advantages will not be so equally distributed: far from being just a logistic support in the "far seas", the Djibuti base will secure a strategic outpost for Beijing's plan of the upcoming Maritime Silk Road (BRI – Belt Road Initiative).

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