

A Multilateral Solution to Somali Piracy

Gary Anderson

The UN recently decided to do something about Somali piracy this month. They have not said exactly what that something is. Shipping companies are losing hundreds of millions. Navies don't know how to legally deal with the pirates even if they capture them. Liberals point out that the Somali pirates are fishermen, merely defending their fishing grounds by asymmetrical means against first and second world fishing fleets that are denuding their offshore harvesting areas. Conservatives claim that the Somali pirates are nothing more than seagoing gangsters who are after quick cash and who find honor and a neat way to get hot chicks by being brigands. Both views have elements of truth. The question is whether this is a national security crisis? It is not. No great American interests are at stake other than international law of the sea and preventing piracy from becoming a trendy thing to do in other places such as the Straits of Malacca which already have a pirate problem. During the recent election, much noise was made about encouraging multilateralism. Eliminating piracy is a problem custom made for a multilateral solution.

We need to avoid becoming entrapped in a "let Uncle Sam do it" situation just because we have the world's largest and most powerful navy which has excess capacity because Iraq and Afghanistan are mostly land wars. This is why we need to avoid those who call for a blockade of Somalia. Blockades are expensive things. The coast of Somalia rivals the size of the American southeastern seaboard, and it took hundreds of Union ships to blockade the Confederacy during our Civil War. We have the only navy in the world that could do such a thing and not one U.S. merchant ship has so far been lost to the Pirates. The Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, Turks, Chinese, and other seagoing nations have much more at stake than we do; this problem is ripe for a coalition solution, and it can be solved; they need to create an effective coalition in order to solve the problem.

The best way to stop the Somali pirates is not at sea through convoys and blockades; we are not dealing with the German High Seas Fleet or even the Confederate Navy here. The best way to do it is to seize and occupy their fishing village bases along the northern coast of Somalia, which the UN resolution authorizes, and then give the locals something productive to do with themselves besides brigandage. This does not need to be done by U.S. Marines, but it will take good troops. The Somalis like to fight and they are entrepreneurial; if they are not given something productive to do once a coalition stops piracy, they will make armed resistance to an occupation force pay as they did from 1993 to 1995.

The United Nations made two mistakes in trying to rebuild Somalia in the mid nineties. First, it tried to re-create Somalia in a western image; second, it tried to do it with military forces not up to the task. When the first President Bush sent American forces into Somalia in 1993, he sent in regiments of crack combat experienced Marines backed up by professional contingents from other coalition nations. Their mission was limited to stopping a famine that had become an international disgrace. This limited mission was replaced by a UN force with a much more ambitious nation-building mandate, but lacking the economic resources to match the vision. The mission was protected by troops more suited to traditional peacekeeping than muscular peace enforcement. The resulting debacle was a predictable debacle.

A counter piracy campaign should be a limited objective affair, designed occupy the local seafront towns used as pirate bases until an alternative economic and security structure could be put in place. Encouraging International fishery concerns to employ local Somali labor using modern equipment in such a way that the locals could compete on a fair basis with the big Asian and European fishing concerns would be a good start, as would forming a coast guard organization to allow former pirates to enforce Somali offshore territorial integrity and escort foreign ship transit; perhaps this organization could be subsidized by the shipbuilding industry under UN mandate as a more honorable cost of doing business than ransom.

In doing so, the ad-hoc or UN anti-pirate coalition should work through the local concerned clans that represent the real legitimacy of Somali local government. This would avoid the UN mistake of trying to create a national government on a basis foreign to traditional Somali culture and politics; if a real national government grows out of it, so much the better, but the international community should solve the problem at hand first.

Could the U.S. help? It could. It could provide sea based logistics and command and control to limit the foreign footprint on Somali soil, but if marines are to reenact the anti-piracy adventures of the shores of Tripoli, they should be Korean Marines or naval infantry from the countries that are most impacted by piracy. Our Marines are otherwise engaged.

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