

Date: 24 August 2017

"Making the world a safer place to live and work"



The developing security situation in the HRA



Maritime Asset Security and Training (MAST) Ltd
Endeavour House
Coopers End Road
Stansted
Essex CM24 1SJ

Telephone: + 44 (0) 1279 216 726
Email: operations@mast-security.co.uk

www.mast-security.com

Overview

With the next inter-monsoon period starting mid-September, we believe it is time to take a fresh appreciation of the security situation in the HRA. We think this is especially important given that during the last March to May inter-monsoon period several Pirate Action Groups (PAG's) put to sea having been financed by Somali investors. One of the PAGs came remarkably close to achieving a successful hijack when they boarded the bulk carrier MV Aris 13. Sufficiently so for organisations that are responsible for the security of the HRA, such as EUNAVFOR, to express concern that the deterrence measures put in place since 2008 have been eroded to the point where the risk / reward balance is shifting back in favour of the Somali pirate.

Add to which there was an attempted terrorist attack on the MT Muskie in the southern Red Sea in May which had much in common with the attack on LNGC Galicia Spirit in October 2016. While no one has claimed either of these attacks, sufficient is known about the nature of the explosive devices to suggest that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsular (AQAP) were the perpetrators.

The lessons to be drawn from these events are twofold:

Firstly, while pirate attacks are still relatively rare, they are the most likely form of violent attack to take place against a commercial vessel in the region, and the spike in attacks conducted in the last inter-monsoon period are likely to be replicated in the next one. All vessels – commercial and private – are strongly advised to ensure that robust BMP 4 measures are in place and that armed guards are used in all cases where the freeboard is low and / or speeds are routinely below 18 knots.

Secondly, the terrorist threat while rare and unpredictable, comes from an organisation which has made it clear that it is determined to disrupt western energy supplies. It is therefore likely that there will be further attacks against tankers in the waters off Yemen. However, these can be countered successfully by the same armed teams that are embarked for counter-piracy duties, assuming that they are well trained in the application of the rules for the use of force and the use of their weapons.

Yemen

Bordering the southern Red Sea and the GoA, Yemen's civil war shows no sign of abating. At present, neither side has the military superiority to reunite the country under a single government. The front lines have remained relatively stable for the last few months, but no political solution has been agreed upon, despite UN led negotiations. The resultant humanitarian crisis in Yemen is severe and deepening with 14.1 million people identified by the UN as currently at risk from extreme hunger and famine.

Houthi Threat

Not entirely surprisingly given that the Saudi led coalition re-supplies its military operations from the sea, the conflict has spilt into the maritime domain. The main protagonists have been the Houthi rebels and they have been remarkably successful at targeting warships and auxiliary vessels with missiles, anti-tank rockets and remotely controlled boats laden with explosives. While it is possible that a commercial vessel could fall victim to poor targeting the most worrying development is the deployment of sea mines by the Houthis in the entrances to harbours. We believe these have been locally manufactured and the clear and present danger is that any that are not identified and removed

by the Saudi forces will in time break free from their moorings and drift. While there is little cause for concern right now, this is something we will be watching closely for in the coming months.

Somalia

Somalia held Presidential elections in February 2017. After a peaceful transition of power, Somalia continues to face familiar problems. Al Shabaab frequently ambushes AMISOM and local security forces denying any significant process to the shaping of a stable country which is vital before Somalia can tackle humanitarian and economic issues. Somalia is recovering from a severe drought which led to wide-spread famine with an identified 2.9 million people facing food insecurity. Youth unemployment in Somalia has not improved with 67% of Somali male youths aged between 14 to 29 unemployed. Pirate financiers offer lucrative and attractive opportunities, and were seen to be increasingly active in the last inter-monsoon period. Somalia continues to be a permissive location for kidnap and ransom piracy operations. Somalia has both an EU and UN arms embargo in place under UNSCR Resolution 2317 in place until November 2017, which will likely be extended.

Eritrea and Sudan

Broadening the Red Sea, Eritrea and Sudan, preside over a number of Red Sea islands. Both countries are considered to be fragile with considerable criminality which is porous over the Red Sea. The islands offer refuge to criminals and opportunities to base operations. To date in 2017 there have been 16 reports of suspect activity and attacks off Eritrea's coastline. Sudan's EEZ has not had any reported maritime criminality, but the possibility should not be discounted. Both countries have UN and EU arms embargo's in place due to political instability.

Piracy

Pirates operating in the HRA are opportunistic. They will target vessels without armed guards and vulnerable vessels which are not adhering to BMP4. UKMTO stated in their latest notice, "All vessels transiting the Gulf of Aden and Bab El Mandeb should follow the guidance of BMP4 to the maximum extent possible and consider the use of embarked armed security." Somalia as well as neighbouring countries offer safe refuge for launching pirate operations and the calmer seas will facilitate this. PAG's are likely to be launched into the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean from mid-September, consisting of a mother vessel and towed supporting skiffs. Many trading dhows in the HRA resemble PAG's – and should only be considered a threat if maintaining a close proximity or if skiffs are launched for independent operations in the direction of merchant shipping.

The carrying of small arms onboard skiffs is common place in the GoA and southern Red Sea. It's thought that a number of reports of suspicious activity have been misidentification of non-threatening local traffic. Pirates will have a ladder or grapping hook onboard and possibly an RPG. Their course of approach will be fast and they will be seeking to bring their boats in close to provide RPG covering fire for the boarding party.

MAST currently assesses the threat of piracy in the HRA to be moderate – an attack is possible, not likely. The upcoming inter-monsoon period may see this raised to substantial if the Somali pirate investors decide to finance a large number of PAGs. In which case an attack could become a strong possibility.

Terrorism

The terrorist threat, attributed to AQAP, has been demonstrated against LNGC Galicia Spirit in October 2016 and MT Muskie in May 2017. Both were attempted but failed attacks which occurred in the BAM and were against fuel laden vessels. The intent of the attacks was to detonate a bomb either on or alongside the target vessel in order to cause a spectacular and/or considerable environmental damage which would detrimentally affect navigation through the strait.

Official reports on the Galicia Spirit detail evidence of attempted boarding and substantial damage to the hull and superstructure of the vessel. The bomb detonated prematurely and was supported by RPG and small arms fire. Similarly, the second attempt on the MT Muskie failed. It is feasible that a similar attack will be attempted in the future.

International Forces

The reduced military presence in the HRA, following the withdrawal of NATO in November 2016, saw a marked increase of piracy operations during the March-May inter-monsoon period. UKMTO’s Notice 001/AUG/2017 published on 9th August states:

“Operating in these waters requires thorough planning and the use of all available information. The maritime threat environment is dynamic; the risks will not remain constant for subsequent visits. It is essential therefore, that Masters, Ship Security Officers and Company Security Officers carry out detailed Risk Assessments for each voyage to the region and for each activity within the region.”

UKMTO’s report can be accessed [here](#). It should be noted that this UKMTO notice replaces Notice 001/JUL/2017 & UKMTO Notice 002/JUL/2017.