

Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade

Global Maritime Piracy: Fueling Terrorism, Harming Trade

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Piracy is not a new problem. The Romans branded pirates outlaws of humanity and punished them severely. In our country's early history, we forcefully, and decisively, confronted pirate attacks off the Barbary Coast.

Today, maritime piracy is booming. As we speak, 23 vessels and 439 hostages are being held by Somali pirates.

As the slides on the monitor show, from 2007 to 2010, hijackings increased sevenfold.

Employing “mother ships,” pirates now operate in a space of 2.5 million square nautical miles, over double the territory from two years ago. In January, a U.N. official declared: “pirates are becoming the masters of the Indian Ocean.” The number and abuse of hostages has increased.

More attacks and more hostages equals greater ransom payments. The average ransom payment of \$300,000 a few years ago has become \$4-5 million today. For Somali pirates, crime does pay...

We should be concerned that these payments may fund al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's East Africa arm. We can't be passive. As Leon Panetta testified last week, al-Sahbaab's threat “to the U.S. homeland is significant and on the rise.”

The United States has begun targeting pirate ringleaders. In April, FBI agents entered Somalia and apprehended an individual who oversaw ransom negotiations for four American hostages who were killed. This was a first. One pirate leader is out of the game. Good.

Unfortunately, there are many more to go. Pirate “investors” who back attacks span the globe – Europe, the Middle East or Australia. Piracy has become a vast criminal enterprise. We must track down these criminals. The GAO has given the Administration poor marks on tracking pirate financing. That has to change.

Many navies are working to deter piracy in the Gulf of Aden. But as Secretary Clinton recently remarked, we are not getting enough out of it. Too many of our partners are there to log sea time, instead of stopping pirates.

The pendulum between the Romans and our 21st century treatment of pirates has swung too far in favor of the pirates. Extreme notions of human rights and the rights of the accused mean that 9 out of 10 pirates are caught – and then released. I prefer the justice our SEALs dispensed against three pirates two years ago.

The lack of prosecution has led to a U.N. push for specialized piracy courts. The Obama Administration, once opposed, is now actively considering this proposal. I have a hard time justifying an international justice system for pirates. But we'll hear the Administration's case.

Lastly, it should be stressed that industry itself can do much to prevent piracy. Shippers are often blasé about ransom payments. And it is the vessels that do not employ best management practices that are hijacked. Not a single ship employing armed guards has been successfully pirated. As we'll hear, we are throwing a lot at this problem – even putting American lives at risk. Industry has to play its part.