

# How to catch a pirate

As concerns over piracy grow, cooperation is becoming key to protecting vital shipping lanes. **Rowan Watt-Pringle** speaks to the experts about how navies and multinational bodies are responding to the threat together and profiles some of the technology now being deployed in anti-piracy efforts.

**W**ith piracy in international waters a major menace for the commercial shipping industry, anti-piracy measures have become an essential facet of global naval operations. Piracy represents both a physical threat to those on board and to global commerce – as much as \$12 billion a year, according to a 2010 report by the US non-profit One Earth Future Foundation.

International law states that piracy is a crime that can be committed only on or over international waters and other places beyond the territorial jurisdiction of any nation, which means anti-piracy measures effectively require concerted coordination between multiple nations.

“Navies can gain increased situational awareness through active surveillance by the vessels in the area, which can report suspicious vessels either to navies or to our 24-hour Piracy Reporting Centre (PRC) in Malaysia,” says Cyrus Mody, ICC International Maritime Bureau (IMB) manager, London.

A US 5th Fleet spokesperson supports this view, saying technologies and

capabilities used by counter-piracy units focus on the ability to achieve a coherent picture across the counter-piracy area of operations, thus enabling the efficient use of allocated resources to effectively disrupt and deter suspected pirates.

According to the IMB, while the number of piracy incidents grew by 5% last year to 430 attacks worldwide, it could drop in 2011, with 397 attacks reported to the PRC as of 14 November.

Glen Forbes, co-founder of real-time commercial social networking site for the maritime industry OCEANUSLive.org, reinforces Mody’s assertion, and says: “Best Management Practice (now at version 4, or BMP4) has been the foundation for the overall improvement in security measures on ships. Combined with greater ship protection measures, planning and, crucially, the use of private security teams, this has made ship ‘hardening’ more reliable.”

## The Gulf of Aden collaboration

Most of the world’s pirate attacks occur off the coast of Somalia, with the Gulf of Aden being the focal point for international anti-piracy operations. As well as the higher military command organisations, EU, Nato and the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), there are convoys conducted by India, Russia, China and other countries.

The 5th Fleet spokesperson highlights one of the major hurdles faced by anti-piracy forces: “The CMF counter-piracy task force (CTF 151) operates in an area encompassing 1.1 million square miles in the Gulf of Aden and Somali Basin. The size of this area compounds the difficulties of counter-piracy operations.

“The US Navy works with coalition partners as part of the CMF, using a range of strategies and technologies. Fixed and rotary wing aircraft are equipped to operate by day or night with advanced electro-optics, secure voice communications and data links, and surveillance and imaging radars to conduct wide area reconnaissance.”

Certainly, collaborative efforts in the region have started to show results. “The joint efforts of the CMF, Nato and the European Union Naval Forces (EUNAVFOR), the nations deploying independently, International Maritime Agencies and the merchant industry have resulted in a significant increase in successful disruptions,” the spokesperson says. “US Naval Forces contribute through US Navy warships, embarked security teams (EST) and visit, board, search and seizure (VBSS) teams, which routinely board suspicious vessels in and around the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.



“These approach and assist visits (AAVs) help to generate support and awareness among commercial vessels to ensure a safe and secure maritime environment.”

According to Forbes, cooperation and coordination are achieved by the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) meetings held in Bahrain, which provide a platform for industry representatives and various multinational forces to exchange views and plans for the conduct of transits through the Gulf of Aden.

### MSC-HOA and Mercury

Forbes is well-respected within anti-piracy circles, having spent over three decades in the British Royal Navy, including time as an instructor for the navy's operational sea training organisation, and as department head for the EUNAVFOR communications team, co-creating two of the world's most innovative means for fighting piracy: the Maritime Security Centre – Horn of Africa (MSC-HOA), and Mercury systems.

“The award-winning MSC-HOA initiative provides closer cooperation with the shipping industry,” says Forbes. “It monitors merchant vessel transits in the Gulf of Aden, provides alerts on piracy and the latest anti-piracy guidance to industry, and allows shipping firms and operators to register their movements through the region.”

The 5th Fleet spokesperson is also quick to commend MSC-HOA: “If a ship's master has already registered the ship with the MSC-HOA prior to entering a high-risk area, as well as notifying the UK Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) regularly once in the area, military forces operating nearby are better prepared to track and respond to vessels in distress.”

Forbes goes on to highlight the key to the initiative: “The biggest impact was the provision in 2009 of Mercury, a ‘neutral’, internet-based communications channel enabling all countries contributing to counter-piracy efforts to exchange immediate operational information.”

Ships can now access information and/or cooperation from other on-duty ships, whatever the state of relations between the two countries, leading to closer ties between forces. “Mercury is not constrained by national security concerns – it is aimed at the need to exchange operational imperative information,” says Forbes.

### New anti-piracy technology

“In terms of technology, it's surprising there has not been much further development on a multinational scale,” says Forbes. “Most military development remains in-house, while there are a plethora of service providers offering various systems that do not have the ‘neutrality’ to draw all parties together on one platform.”

This was why Forbes, along with fellow Royal Navy officer Ryan Wallace, set up OCEANUSLive.org. “The shipping industry has yet to use a system that enables all parties to exchange information securely and in real time,” says Forbes. “OCEANUSLive spans that shortfall.”

The 5th Fleet spokesperson notes that such a system is already available to the military: “As a command and control system, a network called Centrix is at the core of the CMF's counter-piracy capability, as a ‘near real-time’ classified information bearer and operational support system.”

Long-range acoustic devices (LRADs) are another example of non-lethal anti-piracy technology, firing a blast of noise

non-lethal technological alternatives, there is still no substitute for security: “Our armed vessel protection teams are still the preferred choice for the vast majority of shipping companies and managers.

“While non-lethal alternatives do exist, some have failed to prevent pirate attacks; for example, when LRAD units failed to prevent pirates from boarding the tanker MV Biscaglia in 2008 in the Gulf of Aden.”

But neither are armed security teams flawless. “Although there have been several success stories,” says the 5th Fleet spokesperson, “neither citadels nor armed security teams can guarantee military rescue or pirate evasion.”

The spokesperson adds: “On-board security teams do not fall under military rules of engagement. Their employment is at the discretion of the flag state, ship's owners and management companies, with full regard for the results of their actions.”

Forbes warns that until the laws are changed, private security cannot use the cover of UN resolutions, otherwise they may be classed as pirates themselves.

## “ Anti-piracy measures require concerted coordination between multiple nations. ”

that has a high deterrent effect and can cause injury at close range, as well as being able to ‘shout’ warnings at pirates in more than ten languages. They are already in use on many US and other Western naval ships, and others from around the world.

In January 2011, BAE Systems announced the naval-grade anti-pirate laser system. It is not intended to harm but rather to ward off pirate attacks, acting as a warning from more than 2km away. The firm's laser photonic systems head Roy Evans says: “The glare from the laser is intense enough to make it impossible to aim weapons like AK-47s or RPGs, but doesn't have a permanent (negative) effect.”

### Private security

Depending upon the laws of the vessel's flag (or country of registry), armed security may complement best practice and a vessel's overall protection strategy.

David Rider, communications officer at third-party security provider Neptune Maritime Security, believes that, despite

“Bringing pirates to justice remains a complex matter,” says Forbes. “In view of the multinational mix of the merchant vessel, the crew and the flag state, determining which country will assume the responsibility to prosecute is influenced by myriad reasons, while the much criticised ‘capture and release’ policy remains difficult to negate.”

The 5th Fleet spokesperson agrees: “The use of military force is just one element of a multifaceted problem encompassing economic, legal and political factors. While countries such as the Seychelles and Kenya provide a judicial framework for coalition piracy cases, their capacity is limited.

“As economic constraints on military resources make an impact, the importance of coordination with industry and private security may well become an aspect of military planning.”

The view of the experts is clear: a properly-established and internationally supported legal framework and process to resolve piracy cases is an imperative. ■