

Climate Change as a Threat Multiplier: Piracy and Legal Gaps in Policing the Gulf of Aden

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As climate change reshapes environments across the globe, its effects are no longer limited to rising temperatures but are increasingly linked to unstable economies and even piracy. In the early 2000s, heavily armed pirates began seizing cargo ships in the Gulf of Aden, one of the world's busiest shipping routes; but their story might unexpectedly start with empty fishing nets.

Climate change is drastically affecting the coastal countries of the Indian Ocean, which is warming faster than any other ocean globally. This is leading to rising sea levels, changing fishing patterns, and issues such as degradation of coral reefs and fisheries due to acidification. This poses serious threats to the livelihoods of those relying on fishing, particularly in Somalia, which is home to one of the largest fishery sectors in Africa. The decline in fishing, paired with other climate change driven factors such as mass crop failure and severe droughts, has contributed to pushing some coastal communities towards piracy as a means of survival. The geostrategic position of Somalia at the entrance of the Gulf of Aden, which is such a prominent trade area, makes the communities particularly vulnerable to making this turn towards piracy when placed under strain. Between 2005-2015, an estimated US \$339-413 million were paid to Somali pirates as ransoms, highlighting the huge economic incentives of piracy. The financial gain remains the main motivation of the Somali pirates fleeing extreme poverty and unemployment, and it's not difficult to see why.

Piracy can therefore become a rational (though illegal) economic choice. However, the legality for this choice isn't something that always puts potential pirates off as the high seas are not policed consistently, resulting in high rewards without the high risk of being caught. Climate change creates the economic pressure but weak international law enforcement and lack of legal co-operation between states creates the opportunity: the persistence of piracy in the Gulf of Aden is reinforced by weaknesses in international maritime law enforcement. Although international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea define piracy and permit universal jurisdiction, enforcement remains inconsistent due to a lack of coordination between states. The high seas are not governed by a single authority, meaning that policing depends on the willingness and ability of individual nations. In regions such as Somalia, where the political climate is unstable and state authority is limited, this creates enforcement gaps that pirates can exploit. Despite a high-effort international crackdown beginning in 2008, Somali piracy has not diminished significantly. Instead, pirates are just moving further into international waters, where detection and tracking are more difficult. In some cases, fishing communities across the coast of Somalia come together to enable the illegal piracy. They provide food, water and drugs to keep the hostages obtained alive and quiet. Where local populations benefit economically, laws become harder to impose effectively. This shows that legal frameworks alone are insufficient without addressing underlying socio-economic conditions.

Climate change is not the sole cause of the increase in piracy at the Horn of Africa, but rather a critical threat multiplier, intensifying existing vulnerabilities such as weak law enforcement on the high seas and the proximity to major shipping routes. This demonstrates how environmental change can indirectly fuel global security issues. Addressing piracy therefore requires not only military solutions and greater international legal co-ordination in this area of maritime law, but also long-term strategies to combat climate change and support the most vulnerable communities.

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