

Enhancing Maritime Security Governance: European and Asian Naval Missions against Somali Piracy

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Summary

At the Eighth Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the Chair's statement identified piracy at sea as one of the global focus issues of the ASEM partners. The statement mentions in particular piracy off the coast of Somalia as a current threat to the freedom and security of the seas. The Gulf of Aden and the Western Indian Ocean – the waters where Somali piracy occurs – are major thoroughfares of maritime trade between Europe and Asia. Since 2008, a large number of countries have contributed to naval missions against Somali piracy. The great majority of these countries are either European or Asian. The fact that so many nations are involved in addressing Somali piracy – not just through naval missions but also in other ways – constitutes an important opportunity to strengthen security governance on maritime piracy. However, even when facing a common threat it is not easy for such a large number of countries to work together closely when there is little experience in doing so. This is particularly true when it involves the military assets of competing great powers in a maritime region that is of major strategic importance. This chapter addresses the question of how Asian and European countries that are active in naval operations against Somali piracy can contribute to more effective and thus enhanced maritime security governance. It will argue that the European Union (EU), especially when supported by Asian countries, is in a favourable position to help overcome geopolitical impediments to greater international cooperation against piracy. In this regard ASEM, as the main forum for collective dialogue between Asia and Europe, can play a central role.

When taking into account the various naval missions and the relevance of geopolitics, it is particularly the EU that seems strikingly well positioned to stimulate multilateral cooperation. On the one hand, the EU is the actor with the most substantial naval presence in the Gulf of Aden and is very active in counterpiracy. On the other hand, the EU is not directly involved in the main geopolitical tensions in the Asian region. Unlike NATO, it operates independently from the US. The EU's active posture and yet low geopolitical rivalry are useful assets in moving ahead with closer operational integration in counterpiracy at sea. The EU has the opportunity to launch new platforms and procedures for interaction and coordination, that take into account the limitations and possibilities of the other actors. It can take the lead in exploring ways to expand current mechanisms such as the IRTC and SHADE to strengthen the involvement of non-Western actors. It can do so by mediating between the other naval actors and by helping to find solutions that are acceptable to all.

In addition, there is a need to involve more countries in patrolling and coordinating the IRTC, but there is also an urgent need to coordinate protective actions east and south of the Gulf of Aden. While more difficult to achieve, e.g. with regard to hunting for pirate ships, intelligence and evidence gathering, dealing with arrested suspects, and resupplying, any progress in terms of more coordination would be highly useful. Asian countries, but also the US and other actors, all of whom share an interest in more stable maritime relations in the region, can play an important role by supporting the EU when it launches such initiatives. The IRTC has shown that it is possible through international cooperation to increase security for commercial ships at least in a part of the affected area. A more effective and efficient use of military assets and the expanding of relevant multinational mechanisms

will improve security at sea in the short run and will also contribute to a better system of maritime security governance that can have a more lasting impact.

In this context ASEM can contribute to enhancing maritime security governance by providing an informal platform for bilateral and inter-regional dialogue on piracy at the sea. Security dialogue in the ASEM context would facilitate a more coordinated approach of the involved European and Asian interests with regard to their respective naval missions.