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Private Security Counters Pirates

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Piracy attacks against ships rose 11 percent from 2007 to 2008, with the increase most attributable to activity in the Gulf of Aden, off the East coast of Somalia, where 111 of the 293 worldwide piracy cases occurred, according to the International Maritime Bureau. The pirates were mainly from Somalia, and their goal was ransom money.

Although the United Nations and international forces have acted to prevent ship hijackings, they cannot protect every ship that travels through this vast and strategic stretch of water. Some shipping companies are turning to private security for help.

One group that is offering security to ships traveling through the Gulf of Aden is Espada Logistics and Security Group, headquartered in San Antonio, Texas. Piracy prevention hasn't been an easy task, according to Jim Jorrie, Espada's president. The main problem is getting the security officers onto the ships solely for its Gulf of Aden stretch.

It's difficult to negotiate a base of operations in the countries surrounding the Gulf of Aden, says Jorrie, and it's especially challenging to get crew members' weapons in and out of these countries. What Jorrie's group is doing for now is putting officers on a ship at its port of origin.

The officers provide antipiracy training en route to the Gulf of Aden, then focus on attack prevention as they travel through the gulf. They leave the ship at its point of destination.

The problem with this approach is that it stretches what should be a three-day job into nearly three weeks in some cases. "It's not a great financial model for us or for them because it ties up a team," says Jorrie. He was negotiating a deal with one of the gulf border countries to set up a more permanent base of operation as this article went to press.

Most of Jorrie's security team members have military training and experience defending ships. Espada preps each team on assignments and responsibilities. Once the team is on the vessel, it pinpoints watch positions and vantage points where force can be used if needed.

Jorrie says a watch is the most effective way to prevent a pirate attack. He recommends thermal imagers or other nightvision products for the darkness. Espada trains ship crews about watch length; eight hours is too long, and rotations are important. The Espada teams also train the crew to mobilize fire hoses and other nonlethal means to repel pirates.

If pirates are spotted, Jorrie's team will let them know that the ship is well-armed, the goal being to deter the attack rather than to engage and capture the pirates.



Before taking any action, ship security must verify that these are not just fishing boats. If the vessels turn out to be suspicious, security will try to determine whether the individuals on board are carrying weapons—guns were used in 139 incidents in 2008, up from 72 in 2007. Ship security can then shoot a “tracer round” of flare-type shots or even shoot real rounds around the perimeter of the vessel but far enough away not to hit anyone. “Our greatest desire is to have them figure out early on that this is not low-hanging fruit,” says Jorrie.

Jorrie’s group also trains ship crews on how to react if they are boarded, making sure that they will know which alerts to sound and what safe parts of the ship to lock themselves into.

If pirates do board a vessel, it is challenging for countries or the international community to help. The recent pirates come mainly from Somalia. Because Somalia is a largely anarchic state, diplomacy is difficult.

Having authorities confront the pirates is undesirable because an armed standoff with a ship of heavily armed pirates could be deadly for crew members. Additionally, the ships, cargo, and crew members are often from different countries, making it unclear which authorities would be responsible for the rescue.

That’s why the ship and cargo companies often turn to private-sector risk-management companies. These companies provide expertise in hostage negotiation and crisis management that can be valuable in piracy cases. One such company is Clayton Consultants, Inc., a Triple Canopy Company, headquartered in Herndon, Virginia.

The company’s ultimate goal is to secure the crew’s safety, says Jack Cloonan, Clayton’s president. It doesn’t take a law-enforcement or military perspective, meaning that the company’s objective is not to get the bad guys.

In one case that Clayton specialist Leslie Edwards worked on, the government of Puntland, an autonomous region of Somalia, publicly threatened to attack the pirates, and Edwards had to involve the governments of various countries to exert diplomatic pressure on Puntland not to attack. The situation became even more serious once the pirates heard about the threats.

Cloonan recommends having a negotiation strategy, part of which includes not acquiescing to the first ransom offer. Companies need to understand that the process is complicated and likely to take more than a few hours, says Cloonan.

The company’s work goes on mainly behind the scenes. An authorized representative of the ship owner’s company usually interacts directly with the pirates. This helps conceal the security company’s involvement from the pirates.



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Often, the most challenging aspect of the negotiation is figuring out how to hand off the money. Some options are air drops, sea handovers, and handovers on land.

Each choice is risky due to the possibility that pirates will take the money and not release the crew or that the money will be stolen. Clayton's piracy cases have ended successfully with the recovery of the crews and ships.