

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Piracy in the Gulf of Aden

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On September 25, Somali pirates hijacked the *MV Faina*, a Ukrainian freighter loaded with tanks, grenade launchers, anti-aircraft guns, and assorted ammunition and explosives in the Gulf of Aden. The pirates have demanded a \$20-million ransom for the release of the ship, cargo, and crew. The *Faina* is now surrounded by several U.S. warships, with a Russian frigate slated to join them.

Q1: What accounts for the surge in incidents of piracy off the coast of Somalia?

A1: Piracy off the Somali coast has been a long-standing problem, but the last several years have seen a fairly dramatic rise in the number of reported incidents and in the sophistication and brazenness of the attacks. It is essentially an extension of the vacuum of law and governance within Somalia itself. What may have initially been a matter of fishermen looking to supplement incomes in a fairly low-tech, low-overhead, opportunistic enterprise directed at small fishing or cargo vessels has evolved into an increasingly organized, sophisticated, and well-armed industry that has been extremely lucrative. Returns for the pirates are high, with ransoms averaging \$1 million per hijacked vessel. Opportunities are many, as the Gulf of Aden is among the world's busiest shipping lanes. And risk of capture has so far been fairly low, despite a multinational naval coalition (CTF-150), based out of Djibouti.

Q2: Why has the *Faina* incident garnered so much attention?

A2: The *Faina* hijacking illustrates in a very stark way the risks, trend lines, and potential implications of maritime insecurity in a region that is already volatile and dangerous. The brazenness of the attack and, most important, the nature of the ship's cargo raised the specter of sophisticated weaponry ending up in the hands of the Shabaab, Somalia's violent insurgent movement recently designated by the United States as a terrorist group. This security/counterterrorism aspect has drawn U.S. and international attention. But there are important commercial and humanitarian costs to piracy as well. In 2007, maritime attacks forced the World Food Program to shut down emergency food deliveries to Somalia, where an estimated 3 million people remain in dire need of humanitarian assistance. The *Faina* incident may prove to be a much needed catalyst for more robust international attention and response to the Horn of Africa's maritime challenge.

Q3: Where were the arms going?

A3: The other part of this story is the mystery surrounding the eventual destination for the *Faina's* cargo of tanks, grenade launchers, etc. The Kenyan government insists that the shipment is intended for use by Kenya's military. U.S. naval and diplomatic sources have suggested that it is likely bound for the semiautonomous government of southern Sudan, which is gearing up for what will certainly be a chaotic and tense national election in Sudan next year, followed by a referendum in 2011 on whether to secede from northern Sudan. The Shabaab has claimed that the arms are bound for the insurgency's arch enemy Ethiopia and has called on the pirates to destroy the ship and sink the cargo.

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