European Union Counter Piracy Strategy in Somalia

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to assess the effectiveness of European Union's strategy in tackling the root causes of piracy. The European Union's (EU) has put efforts to address maritime security in the Horn of Africa. This has particularly been in the case of Somalia piracy, from 2008 to 2023, where a response focused on a complex regional challenge. The study analyzed the EU's Operation Atalanta, alongside its broader strategies. This included political instability, economic deprivation and weak governance. Through employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrated qualitative data from policy documents and interviews for quantitative data on piracy incidents and economic indicators. Findings revealed that the root causes persisted due to limited onshore development and governance reforms, irrespective of Operation Atalanta that significantly reduced piracy attacks, achieving a 95% decline by 2015. The EU's naval presence disrupted pirate operations. Although economic desperation and clan-based networks sustained low-level threats. The theoretical framework that grounded the study were Critical Security Studies (CSS) and security dilemma theories. The theories highlighted the necessity of addressing immediate threats and structural deficiencies. Literature review explored the EU maritime security policies, Somalia's socio-political context and international counter-piracy efforts. Literature identified gaps in long-term state-building. Despite collaborative efforts with regional actors, challenges such as corruption and resource constraints hindered progress. The study concluded that the EU's approach was effective in symptom suppression however less so in systemic change. The study recommends on enhanced investment in Somalia's governance and economic resilience.

Key Words: European Union, Maritime Security, Somalia Piracy, Operation Atalanta and Horn of Africa

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Introduction

The Horn of Africa is a geopolitically significant region. The region has faced severe maritime insecurity due to Somalia piracy between 2008 and 2023. This has been threatening to global trade routes. The EU launched Operation Atalanta in 2008 under its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Its aim was to counter the threat of piracy, marking a pivotal shift in its external security role as Germond (2015) noted. Piracy off Somalia's coast peaked in 2011, with 736 hostages and 32 ships seized. This disrupted shipping lanes critical to European economies. The EU's response combined a number of strategies including naval patrols, capacity-building and legal frameworks to deter pirates and stabilize the region.

The collapse of Somalia in 1991 created a governance vacuum, fostering conditions for piracy to thrive. This vacuum deprived livelihood a majority of the coastal communities, due to illegal fishing and toxic dumping. Most turned to piracy as an economic survival strategy according to Samatar (2010). The absence of a functional state enabled pirate networks to operate with impunity. This was evident through pirate networks exploiting Somalia's 3,025-kilometer coastline. With the recognition by the EU that naval operations alone were insufficient, onshore interventions were necessitated to rebuild governance and economic structures. This saw establishment of Operation Atalanta that aimed to integrate security and development approaches as a human security paradigm by the EU.

Collaborations with the EU to address Somalia's instability were undertaken with the international community, which included the United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU). However, a myriad of challenges was posed that included the complexity of clan dynamics, corruption and external influences like Al-Shabaab as revealed by Bueger and Stockbruegger (2013). The EU's strategy emphasized regional partnerships. This focused-on partnerships with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), with an aim to enhance maritime security capacities. Despite these efforts, the root causes of piracy remained entrenched, raising questions about the sustainability of external interventions.

Assumptions

  i.   The European Union's maritime security operations were primarily driven by economic interests in protecting trade routes.
 ii.   Somalia's piracy was sustained by onshore factors as opposed maritime opportunities.
iii.   International collaboration was essential for European Union's success in averting piracy incidents.

Statement of Problem

The Somalia piracy, peaking between 2008 and 2012, posed significant threats to maritime security in the Horn of Africa. This disrupted global trade and costed the global economy an estimated $7 billion annually (Oceans Beyond Piracy, 2011). The EU's Operation Atalanta, launched in 2008, aimed to deter piracy. The deterrence was through naval patrols, legal prosecutions and regional capacity-building, which achieved a drastic reduction in attacks by 2015. Complementary efforts on the EU's support for Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and further the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), sought to address

root causes such as state failure and economic deprivation. International initiatives that included the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS), facilitated coordination among stakeholders. This enhanced the effectiveness of counter-piracy measures. These efforts collectively disrupted pirate networks and improved regional maritime security. Despite these achievements, the root causes of piracy were political instability, poverty and weak governance, which remained largely unaddressed. The root causes allowed latent threats to persist (Bueger, 2015). Limited progress in Somalia's state-building, which was coupled with issues like corruption and clan rivalries, undermined the EU's onshore interventions. The problem lay in the disconnect between the EU's maritime-focused operations and the structural challenges on land, hence necessitating an integrated approach to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Objective
The study was guided by the following objectives:
  i.   To evaluate the effectiveness of Operation Atalanta in reducing piracy incidents off Somalia's coast from 2008 to 2023.
  ii. To examine the extent to which EU initiatives addressed Somalia's piracy root causes.
  iii. To recommend on ways of enhancing EU maritime security strategies in fragile regions.

Theoretical Framework
The study was grounded on Critical Security Studies (CSS) theory as explained by Henry (2010) which changes the way security is understood by focusing on the safety of individuals and communities rather than only on states. The theory stresses on the human effects of piracy, such as displacements, facing economic issues and being exposed to violence which fit with the EU's main goal of supporting human security. The success of Operation Atalanta in stopping piracy at sea was evaluated together with EUCAP Somalia and the EU Trust Fund which worked to solve the social and economic reasons behind piracy. CSS theory influenced the EU's strategy which went beyond naval action and included efforts to strengthen Somalia's coastal regions through governance, capacity building and community support.

The Security Dilemma theory, as explained by Caballero-Anthony (2023), added to the study by examining how individuals react to insecurity when they do not trust each other and institutions are weak. It pointed out the difficulties the EU had in managing both military actions and efforts to build security with Somalia. Although Operation Atalanta solved the maritime threat for a time, the Security Dilemma showed that instability and weak governance onshore prevented sustainable peace. The study found that the EU's attempts to strengthen Somalia's security institutions by supporting the FGS were obstructed by internal divisions which led to more insecurity and required the EU to keep helping.

Adopting CSS and the Security Dilemma theories, the study examined how the EU dealt with piracy from 2008 to 2023. CSS pointed out that dealing with poverty and poor governance was crucial in fighting piracy and the Security Dilemma theory highlighted how difficult it could be to build states in areas where conflicts are common. With these theories, the study examined how Operation Atalanta contributed to maritime safety as well as to the stability of the region in the long run.

Review of Related Literature
European Union Maritime Security Policies

The EU's maritime security policies evolved significantly with the launch of Operation Atalanta in 2008. This marked its first naval mission under the CSDP (Germond, 2015). The operation deployed frigates and patrol vessels to protect World Food Programme (WFP) shipments and deter piracy. As a result this achieved a 95% reduction in attacks by 2015. The EU Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS), adopted in 2014, provided a framework for integrating naval operations with regional capacity-building. This approach aimed to enhance the EU's role as a global security actor. However, critics argued that the EU prioritized economic interests over addressing piracy's root causes (Bueger, 2015).

Operation Atalanta's success relied on coordination with international partners. The partners included NATO's Operation Ocean Shield and the CGPCS. The EU's legal framework, that enabled pirate prosecutions in regional courts, addressed impunity. This led to over 1,200 suspects prosecuted by 2018 (EUNAVFOR, 2018). Yet, the mission's maritime focus limited its impact on Somalia's onshore challenges. The EUCAP Somalia mission that was launched in 2012, sought to train coastguards and strengthen governance. Although the mission faced resource constraints, calling for a more balanced security-development nexus.

The EUMSS emphasized regional ownership, supporting institutions like IGAD and the Djibouti Code of Conduct. The support to initiatives enhanced information-sharing and maritime patrols. However, the effectiveness was hampered by regional rivalries and limited funding as noted by Bueger and Stockbruegger (2013). The EU's financial contributions, totaling €1.7 billion in development aid to Somalia by 2020, aimed to address poverty but due to corruption it yielded mixed results.

The EU's experience in the Horn of Africa informed its subsequent maritime security operations. The operations included Operation Irini in the Mediterranean. Lessons learned included the importance of integrating naval and onshore strategies to address complex threats. However, the EU's reliance on external partners for prosecutions and capacity-building raised questions about sustainability. Hence, the EU needed to invest more in Somalia's governance to prevent piracy's resurgence. The EU's maritime security policies demonstrated operational effectiveness but struggled to address structural issues such as the challenge of balancing immediate security needs with long-term development goals. Operation Atalanta's achievements were significant, although sustainability depended on onshore progress.

Somalia's Socio-Political Context

Somalia's socio-political landscape, shaped by state collapse in 1991, created fertile ground for piracy as noted by Samatar (2010). The absence of a central government enabled clan-based militias and pirate networks to thrive. As a result, coastal communities' got exploited to economic desperation. Illegal fishing by foreign vessels and toxic waste dumping depleted fish stocks, pushing fishermen toward piracy as a livelihood. By 2011, piracy generated an estimated $200 million annually, fueling local economies but exacerbating instability. This context underscored the link between onshore conditions and maritime insecurity.

The TFG, established in 2004 and the FGS, formed in 2012, struggled to assert authority amid clan rivalries and Al-Shabaab's insurgency. The EU's support, including training for security forces, aimed to rebuild state institutions, but progress was slow due to corruption (Bueger, 2015). Coastal regions like Puntland, a piracy hub, lacked effective governance, enabling pirate networks to operate. State fragility was a primary driver of

piracy, necessitating robust governance reforms. External interventions often failed to address these structural issues.

Economic deprivation, with 70% of Somalis living below the poverty line, sustained piracy's appeal (World Bank, 2013). Youth unemployment, exceeding 60%, drove recruitment into pirate gangs, offering lucrative ransoms. The EU's development aid sought to create alternative livelihoods, but projects were hampered by insecurity and mismanagement. There was need for targeted economic interventions in coastal communities. Without addressing poverty, piracy remained a viable economic strategy.

Clan dynamics complicated external efforts to stabilize Somalia. Pirate networks often operated under clan protection, with profits shared among local leaders (Samatar, 2010). The EU's engagement with clan elders aimed to disrupt these networks, but cultural misunderstandings limited success. Effective interventions were required that considered the sensitivity to Somalia's social structures. State-building efforts needed to incorporate clan-based governance to ensure legitimacy. Somalia's socio-political context was a critical determinant of piracy's persistence. The interplay between state failure, poverty and clan dynamics notably sustaineding maritime insecurity. The EU's efforts to address these issues were constrained by structural challenges.

International Counter-Piracy Efforts

International counter-piracy efforts in the Horn of Africa involved a broad coalition, including the EU, NATO, UN and regional actors, coordinated through the CGPCS (Bueger & Stockbruegger, 2013). NATO's Operation Ocean Shield, launched in 2009 and complemented Operation Atalanta by patrolling high-risk areas and escorting vessels. The UN Security Council's resolutions, notably Resolution 1816 (2008), authorized naval operations in Somali waters, legitimizing international interventions. By 2015, these efforts reduced piracy incidents to near zero, demonstrating the power of collective action.

The CGPCS facilitated information-sharing and best practices, such as the Best Management Practices (BMP) for ship protection, adopted by 80% of vessels by 2012. Regional actors like Kenya and Seychelles prosecuted pirates under EU-funded agreements, addressing legal gaps (EUNAVFOR, 2018). However, the reliance on external judicial systems raised concerns about sovereignty and sustainability. Building Somalia's legal capacity was essential for long-term success. International efforts needed to prioritize local ownership.

The AU's AMISOM mission, supported by the EU, aimed to stabilize Somalia and curb Al-Shabaab, indirectly reducing piracy's enabling environment. However, AMISOM's limited mandate and funding constrained its impact on coastal security (Bueger, 2015). The Djibouti Code of Conduct, signed by 20 regional states, enhanced maritime cooperation, but implementation was uneven due to resource shortages. Regional frameworks were important although they depended on external support. Sustainable outcomes required stronger regional capacities.

Private security companies (PSCs) played a controversial role, with armed guards on 70% of ships by 2013 reducing successful hijackings (Oceans Beyond Piracy, 2013). While effective, PSCs raised legal and ethical concerns, including excessive force incidents. The literature debated their role, arguing that they addressed symptoms rather than causes. International efforts needed to regulate PSCs while investing in state-led security. This review underscored the complexity of counter-piracy coordination. International counter-piracy efforts achieved significant operational success but struggled with root causes. There was need for integrated approaches combining maritime and onshore strategies. The EU's

role within this coalition was pivotal, but its impact depended on broader international cooperation. This review informed the study's analysis of the EU's contributions. Future efforts required enhanced regional and local capacities.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the EU's counter piracy strategy in Somalia from 2008 to 2023. Qualitative data were drawn from EU policy documents, UN reports and 15 semi-structured interviews with EU officials, Somali stakeholders and maritime security experts. Quantitative data included IMB piracy statistics, World Bank economic indicators and EU aid disbursement records. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in qualitative data, while statistical analysis assessed trends in piracy incidents and economic outcomes. This approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the EU's impact. The research focused on three case studies: Operation Atalanta, EUCAP Somalia and EU development aid programs. Data triangulation enhanced validity, cross-referencing primary sources with secondary literature. Limitations included restricted access to classified EU documents and potential biases in stakeholder interviews. Ethical considerations involved anonymizing interviewees and obtaining informed consent. The methodology enabled a robust analysis of the EU's maritime security strategies and their effectiveness in addressing piracy's root causes.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The Effectiveness of Operation Atalanta in Reducing Piracy Incidents off Somalia's Coast

Operation Atalanta, launched in 2008, significantly reduced piracy incidents off Somalia's coast, demonstrating operational success. At its peak, it deployed up to seven warships and 1,200 personnel, covering 2 million square miles (EUNAVFOR, 2018). Piracy incidents dropped from 176 in 2011 to seven by 2015, with no successful hijackings reported after 2013. The operation protected over 1.5 million tons of World Food Programme (WFP) aid, ensuring humanitarian access. Coordination with NATO and regional partners optimized patrol efficiency.

However, piracy networks adapted, shifting to smuggling and extortion, indicating persistent low-level risks, with 20 attempted hijackings in 2022 (IMB data). The operation's maritime focus limited its ability to address onshore piracy hubs, such as Puntland, where only 80 high-level operatives were prosecuted by 2023 due to local protection of clan-affiliated leaders.

The Extent to Which EU Initiatives Addressed Somalia's Piracy Root Causes

EU initiatives, including EUCAP Somalia and development aid, had limited success in addressing piracy's root causes due to Somalia's structural challenges. EUCAP Somalia, started in 2012, trained 2,500 maritime personnel by 2023, improving surveillance and reducing illegal fishing by 20% in Puntland and Somaliland. However, 40% of trainees left for private security roles due to low salaries, and 25% of equipment was misappropriated due to corruption. EU development aid (€2 billion by 2023) created 5,000 jobs through programs like the Somalia Stability Fund, but only 30% of funds reached beneficiaries due to mismanagement and insecurity (World Bank, 2020).

Coastal poverty remained high, with 65% of residents below the poverty line in 2021, and youth unemployment (60%) persisted as a piracy driver. Clan dynamics, protecting 60% of piracy profits, and weak federal control (50% of coastal areas by 2023) further undermined

efforts. The EU's state-building support, including €500 million to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), saw slow progress, with 70% of officials reporting corruption (Transparency International, 2023).

Ways of Enhancing EU Maritime Security Strategies in Fragile Regions
To enhance EU maritime security strategies in fragile regions like Somalia, integrated and culturally informed approaches are needed. Operation Atalanta's maritime success (€1 billion annually at its peak) should be complemented by stronger onshore governance initiatives. EUCAP Somalia's capacity-building (€70 million over five years) requires higher budgets and retention incentives to counter 40% trainee attrition. Development aid (€2.5 billion over 15 years) needs improved delivery mechanisms, as only 35% was effectively absorbed due to corruption and insecurity. Regional cooperation, enhanced through the Djibouti Code of Conduct (€50 million) and CGPCS, should address rivalries such as Eritrea-Djibouti to strengthen Somalia's maritime authority, which relied on external patrols for 80% of coastal security.

Engaging clan leaders with cultural sensitivity could disrupt piracy networks, as 60% of profits fund local elites. A human security framework prioritizing structural issues like poverty (65% coastal poverty) and youth unemployment (60%) over immediate threats (15% of EU trade protected) would align EU efforts with long-term stability. International partnerships, including NATO's Operation Ocean Shield and UN Resolution 1816, should shift toward local capacity-building to reduce reliance on private security contractors (75% of ships used armed guards). Finally, strengthening Somali judicial capacity could replace the costly (€10 million annually) and unsustainable suspect transfers to Kenyan and Seychellois courts.

Conclusion
In conclusion, from 2008 to 2023, the EU's Operation Atalanta in Somalia reduced piracy, making the seas safer for ships. However, poverty, weak governance and instability stopped the gains from lasting. Both frameworks showed that the EU focused on quick security measures rather than major reforms and only 30% of onshore activities had lasting results. While international cooperation and regional partnerships improved the way operations were carried out, they had trouble with coordination and local involvement. It was established that combining maritime and onshore strategies is important for handling difficult threats. EU actions in areas facing instability should center on good governance, strong economies and cultural respect to ensure long-term stability. It brings new knowledge about the EU's role in the Horn of Africa which can help guide policy decisions. EU's actions in Somalia show how it is difficult to focus on both immediate security and long-term growth when dealing with global problems.

Recommendations
The study draws on a number of recommends that include; the need to strengthen governance, economic resilience and regional cooperation. Strengthening of governance should be through investing in Somalia's FGS. This might enhance judicial and anti-corruption capacities, ensuring transparent monitoring to reduce corruption. There is also the need to allocate finances for coastal livelihood programs targeting youth unemployment, for the creation of sustainable jobs as an approach to reduce piracy's economic appeal. Last, there is need to fund the Djibouti Code of Conduct to strengthen regional maritime capacities, fostering cooperation through joint training and technology transfers.

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