

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Beyond Piracy: The Emerging Contest for Somalia's Maritime Security

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S*ummary*

Piracy is resurging off Somalia's coast as the international architecture that has been built to suppress it is fraying.

On 17 August 2026, pirates seized the Cameroon-flagged cargo vessel *Lutuf* five nautical miles off Somalia’s southern coast. The vessel was carrying supplies to Türkiye’s military training facility in Mogadishu. After 10 days of joint operations, Turkish and Somali forces were able to free the vessel, an operation in which 14 suspected pirates were reportedly killed.¹ Weeks earlier, the tanker *MV Asana* was hijacked in the Gulf of Aden. Another vessel, the *Eureka*, was held for a reported ransom of US\$ 10 million.² The Eritrean-flagged *Sibu 1* was taken from the coast of Yemen and steered towards the semi-autonomous region of Puntland.

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) reported that, as of late August 2026, six vessels and over 90 seafarers remained in the custody of pirates and armed robbers operating in the region.³ Figures from the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) tell a similar story—Somali pirates were responsible for 94 per cent of all crew members taken hostage globally during the first half of 2026.⁴

The number of attacks, however, remains far below the levels recorded in 2009–2011. This time, the attacks are occurring inside a far more contested geopolitical environment. Piracy is resurging as the international architecture built to suppress it frays, and a new set of external powers (Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan) are vying to fill the vacuum left by the United States.

For India, which has spent the past few years building the operational and legal capacity to respond to Somali piracy, the shifting strategic configuration of the Horn of Africa merits closer policy attention.

Resurgence of Somali Piracy

The immediate trigger for piracy’s resurgence has been a widening opportunity at sea. The multinational naval patrols that have policed Somali waters since 2008 are now stretched thinner than at any point in the past decade. Assets have been diverted towards the Red Sea in response to Houthi attacks on shipping and towards the Strait of Hormuz amid the US–Iran confrontation. The European Union’s Operation ATALANTA, once the backbone of international counter-piracy efforts, now maintains a presence of one to three surface combat vessels and one maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft at any given time.⁵

¹ [“Türkiye, Somalia Forces Free Cargo Vessel Hijacked By Pirates”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 30 August 2026.

² [“Somali Pirates Raise Ransom Demand for Hijacked Tanker Carrying Egyptian Sailors”](#), *Middle East Monitor*, 13 May 2026.

³ [“IMO Calls For Urgent Action As Piracy Resumes in the Gulf of Aden”](#), International Maritime Organization (IMO), 24 August 2026.

⁴ [“Maritime Piracy Incidents Fall to Lowest Since 1992, But Risks Remain”](#), International Chamber of Commerce (ICC)-Commercial Crime Services, 9 July 2026.

⁵ [“European Union Naval Force Somalia Military Operation ATALANTA”](#), European External Action Service (EEAS), 30 November 2022.

Compounding this diminished naval footprint is a degree of complacency among merchant crews, who, after years of relative calm, have relaxed their precautionary measures. Measures such as carrying armed guards on board, maintaining higher transit speeds, and keeping a greater standoff distance from the coast had previously proven effective. If anything, the IMO’s continued discouragement of armed self-defence measures has reinforced this drift rather than correcting it.

But the deeper causes are onshore, not at sea. Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing by foreign fleets continues to erode Somalia’s coastal economy.⁶ Pirates continue to exploit the perception that hijacking is a form of self-defence against illegal foreign fishing. A fractured and cash-strapped federal government in Mogadishu, preoccupied with an Al-Shabaab insurgency, has never managed to rebuild the naval and coastguard capabilities needed to police its own waters.

One tactic has re-emerged to extend pirates’ operational range deep into the Indian Ocean: the hijacking of fishing dhows to use as ‘motherships’.⁷ This is the same method that made the 2009–2011 wave difficult to contain. Pirate groups are now operating with growing coordination and reach. The underlying conditions that produced the earlier crisis, it seems, were never truly eradicated; they were held in check by sustained international intervention. As that presence recedes, those conditions are re-emerging.

A Crowded Coastline

What is different in 2026 is that the geopolitical competition is now unfolding amid the resurgence of piracy. In July, the US notified the African Union (AU) that, from 31 December 2026, it would end funding for the UN Support Office in Somalia, which is the main logistics backbone that supplies rations and facilitates transportation for roughly 12,000 personnel of the African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM).⁸ The US has historically covered US\$ 500 million of AUSSOM’s logistics package.⁹ Its withdrawal, compounded by the mission’s chronic inability to secure its own budget, would already strain an already fragile security architecture. This is a mission that the AU itself regards as the last line of defence against a full-scale Al-Shabaab resurgence across Somalia.

⁶ Sharvari Devendra Patil, [“IUU Fishing and Human Security in Western Indian Ocean”](#), Issue Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 12 January 2026.

⁷ Debayan Tewari, [“Somalian Pirates and Their Role in War | Explained”](#), *The Hindu*, 26 August 2026.

⁸ Mohamed Daud Ismail, [“What Does the U.S. Funding Exit from UNSOS Mean for Somalia’s Stability?”](#), Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), 20 July 2026.

⁹ Faisal Ali, David Lewis and Giulia Paravicini, [“Somalia Peacekeeping Mission At Risk As US Blocks UN Support, Sources Say”](#), *Reuters*, 2 July 2026.

Various powers have now stepped into this vacuum. For over a decade, Türkiye has been one of Somalia’s closest security partners, a relationship anchored by its largest overseas training base located in Mogadishu. Since 2024, that partnership has gained considerable momentum. Under their bilateral agreements, Ankara has assumed formal responsibility for aspects of maritime security in Somali territorial waters. Türkiye’s parliament also renewed the naval mandate covering the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters in February 2026.¹⁰

The practical effects of this extended mandate are increasingly noticeable. Turkish drones, frigates and commandos now regularly function as the de facto first responders to hijackings, as demonstrated by the Lutuf rescue operation. A growing commercial footprint, including hydrocarbon exploration off the Somali coast and various port and blue-economy agreements, also accompanies Türkiye’s security presence. Together, these commercial ties give Ankara an increasingly significant position along one of the world’s most consequential shipping routes. Ankara has expanded its strategic presence without establishing a conventional overseas naval base.

Pakistan has also deepened its engagement. On 4 August 2026, defence ministers of Somalia and Pakistan signed an MoU on counterterrorism, military training and capacity-building.¹¹ The agreement followed the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement, which brought Pakistan, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia into a broader trilateral security framework welcomed by Somalia. Much of this remains aspirational: no base or port access has been announced, and funding, troop numbers, and equipment standardisation remain unclear.¹² Even so, Pakistan’s growing engagement adds another external security actor to a coastline where Türkiye and Saudi Arabia are already expanding their roles. This development is also occurring at a time when the Western-backed peacekeeping architecture, built up since 2007, is losing its principal funder—the United States.

Implications for India

India’s own response to Somali piracy has matured considerably since the 2023–2024 wave. Consider the case of MV Ruen. The Indian Navy intercepted the hijacked vessel, and its captors were subsequently prosecuted—a process that culminated in July 2026 when all 35 pirates were convicted by a Mumbai special court under

¹⁰ [“Türkiye Renews Its Two-Year Military Deployment in Somali’s Waters”](#), *TurkishPress*, 22 July 2026.

¹¹ [“Somalia and Pakistan Sign Defence Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding”](#), Ministry of Defense, Federal Republic of Somalia, 4 August 2026.

¹² [“The Mecca Joint Defense Agreement: The Makings of a New Security Architecture”](#), Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2 September 2026.

India’s Maritime Anti-Piracy Act.¹³ However, the strategic picture around that operational success is shifting. A Pakistan–Turkiye–Saudi security architecture consolidating around Mogadishu does not, in itself, threaten Indian shipping. Indian crews and interests stand to benefit from any credible anti-piracy presence, regardless of who provides it. The Lutuf case illustrates this: the vessel had six Indian nationals onboard.

The larger concern for India is something else. India is no longer one of the few external navies with a stake in the security order of the Western Indian Ocean. Several other external navies have now entered the picture. In response, India’s public posture has so far remained comparatively restrained. Indian Ministry of External Affairs responded to the Pakistan–Somalia defence pact by saying that India was “following developments closely”.¹⁴ But Somalia’s changing security landscape may soon call for a firmer position than that.

India’s response should therefore focus on sustained naval and diplomatic engagement. India should maintain a regular naval presence in the Gulf of Aden and Western Indian Ocean, and even extend its deployments when the threat warrants. Moreover, a wave of successful ransom payments is also fuelling a resurgence in Somali piracy and is now threatening to cement the ‘hijack-for-ransom’ business model once again.

India’s re-election to the Council of the International Maritime Organization in November 2025, along with its membership in other multinational bodies, gives New Delhi a platform to press for the burden-sharing that AUSSOM’s funding crisis has made urgent. The architecture that has governed Somali waters since 2007 has now lost its principal funder, and Türkiye, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are already positioning to shape whatever replaces it. India’s naval and legal capacity has earned it a credible claim to a seat at that table. What remains unresolved is whether New Delhi will spend the diplomatic and strategic capital needed to occupy it.

¹³ [“India Secures 100% Conviction of 35 Somali Pirates in MV Ruen Hijacking Case”](#), *ANI News*, 20 July 2026.

¹⁴ Prabhakar Jha, [“Mecca Joint Defence Agreement: India ‘Closely Following’ Pakistan-Saudi-Turkey Pact, Says MEA”](#), *LiveMint*, 7 August 2026.

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