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## No short-term fix in battle against piracy

*Maritime cooperation is containing the problem in parts of the world, but ultimately it is instability on land which allows piracy to persist.*

Piracy and armed robbery at sea have fallen to their lowest levels in over 20 years, according to data gathered in the first six months of 2016. The decline is in large part a measure of the success achieved by international intervention and regional cooperation.

Two regions that had been piracy 'hotspots', the Somali Basin and the Strait of Malacca, have continued to see attacks on shipping fall away. Success in the waters off Somalia follows the deployment of multi-national naval patrols and the steps taken by commercial shipping to improve on-board security measures, including the use of armed guards.

In the Strait of Malacca, effective cooperation between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia has seen pirates denied safe haven. Coordinated patrols by the three countries, together with information sharing and information management, and a crackdown on crime syndicates on shore, have all but stifled pirate activity.

But robbery and kidnap at sea is not in retreat across the globe. In waters off the southern Philippines, the Islamist militant group Abu Sayyaf has been able to hijack vessels and seize their crews. Off Nigeria, in the Gulf of Guinea, a fall in the number of cases of hijack for cargo theft has been offset by an increase in the incidence of marine kidnap for ransom.

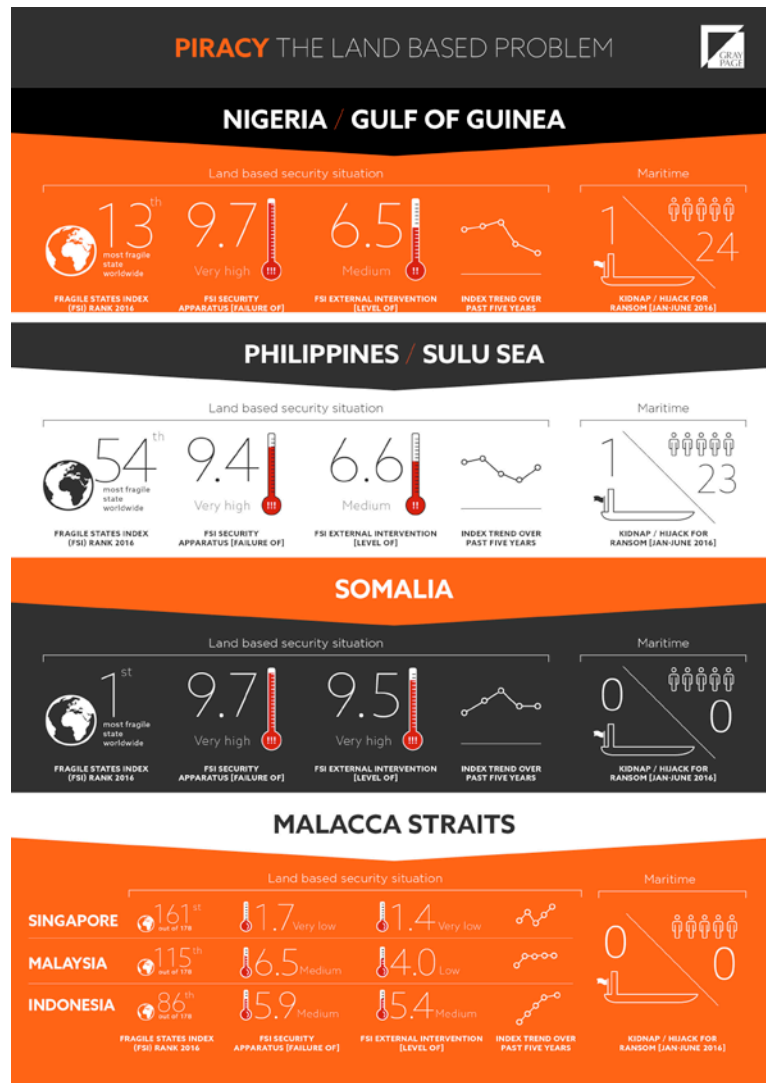
Both regions are contending with instability and conflict, opening the way for criminal gangs and insurgents to launch attacks at sea. Resolving these conflicts is likely to be a long and complex process, with no guarantee of success, but without resolution the threat from piracy remains.

In the waters off Nigeria, the recent rise in the kidnappings of ships' crews for ransom has coincided with a deteriorating security situation onshore. Instability has been particularly pronounced on the Nigerian coast in the oil-rich Niger delta. There the government has ended a programme that provided former insurgents with a monthly income and at the same time it has been attempting to rein in rampant oil theft. The moves have provoked a wave of unrest with a surge in attacks on oil industry installations. The growing security vacuum has given pirate gangs ample space to operate and go largely unmolested.

In the same way, the seizing of ships' crews off the southern Philippines can be linked to an absence of government control onshore. Abu Sayyaf has been battling the Philippines government for almost 20 years but it is only recently that it has begun attacking shipping.

This paper is intended as a general summary of issues in the stated field. It is not a substitute for authoritative advice on a specific matter. It is provided for information only and free of charge. Every reasonable effort has been made to make it accurate and up to date but no responsibility for its accuracy or correctness, or for any consequences of reliance on it, is assumed by Gray Page.

*Piracy can be contained with international cooperation, but ultimately it is linked to instability ashore.*



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The group's change in tactics has had an impact disproportionate to the scale of its activities. Three attacks this year, on Indonesian and Malaysian vessels, triggered a suspension of coal shipments to the Philippines and there are fears that further attacks on shipping will degrade security in what is already a largely-ungoverned space. The Islamic separatist group is clearly ready to take full advantage of weak government control to extend its campaign of violence and extortion into the region's shipping lanes.

Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines have promised to work together in an attempt to counter the threat, but without a strong land-based military presence in the southern Philippines any maritime security efforts – joint or separate – are likely to be ineffective. Unfortunately the absence of stability on the coasts of the Gulf of Guinea and the Celebes Sea in Southeast Asia is unlikely to be reversed, certainly not in the short-term. The Abu Sayyaf insurgency is ingrained to the point where vested interests prefer to see the militants prosper. Proceeds from kidnappings and criminal activity increasingly support a sub-economy.



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In Nigeria the government has been struggling with long-standing ethnic and religious tensions while trying to reform its petroleum-based economy, an economy in which revenue has been squandered through corruption and mismanagement. Neither region can look forward to the swift establishment of effective government. While lawlessness on land continues, potential for piracy will remain.

The successes in the Somali Basin and the Malacca Strait are unlikely to be replicated. The trade routes in the Gulf of Guinea and the Celebes Sea are not of such significance as to secure international protection. And anyway, Somali-based piracy has only been held in-check. The root of the problem – conflict and instability in Somalia – hasn't gone away.

Defeating piracy is a long-term project. Where the burden falls on the states that struggle to impose their authority the battle is likely to be prolonged. The Fragile States Index (formerly the Failed States Index) ranks Nigeria 13th out of 178 nations. The Philippines is ranked 54th. Their resources for tackling piracy are limited.

Some 200 years ago US President Thomas Jefferson, engaged in a war with the Barbary pirates, observed that “the surest way to create peace at sea [is to] impose rule of law on the land where pirates hid.” It is sound advice in terms of objectives, but hard to achieve in practice.

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#### ABOUT GRAY PAGE

Established in 2003, Gray Page is a specialist maritime consulting and advisory group that solves problems around the world for organisations operating in the international shipping markets.

Gray Page provides investigative, intelligence and risk management services. These include: investigating cargo theft, losses, damage, disappearances and fraud; tracing assets, vessels and witnesses; as well as providing intelligence, risk management and asset protection expertise.

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