Learning from (Somali) Piracy. Lessons from the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia.

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Dear Ladies and Gentleman,

Modern piracy has been on the agenda of international security now for roughly ten years. Piracy existed before, but it was an issue that the shipping and insurance industry dealt with. As is common knowledge the measures that have been adopted to contain Somali piracy have shown considerable success. Today I like to report on the outcomes of a lessons learned project, which has asked: How can this success be explained? How did the counter-piracy system work? What can be learned for maritime security in general and other areas of operations?

I like to start by giving you a brief background of the lessons learned project. I shall then discuss the operational coordination of counter-piracy work. I conclude with a range of lessons for the organization of security governance and military operations.

The Lessons Learned Project and Counter-piracy as Experiment

The Lessons Learned Project was initiated by the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia in 2013. It was initiated since there was a feeling among the core actors that the achievements and successes of the group had to be documented and analysed. The groups work was innovative and an attempt to cope with an international security issue differently. Indeed the group was an experiment in security governance and the organization of operations. The group hence put together a consortium which would record the work and distil lessons and best practices from it. A core driver in initiating this, was the that-time chair, the US Department of State, which also provided partial funding for carrying it out. When the European External Action Services took over the chair it pushed the project further. NATO's Operations Division was also highly supportive in the project.

Part of the Lessons Learned Project was to record the voices of participants and publish these in an online repository as well as to organize a team of internationally recognized academics who would analyse the group from different perspectives. This was the task taken over by my team at Cardiff University. The website is online at www.lessonsfrompiracy.net and includes reports from analysts from China, Pakistan, Kenya, Norway or Japan, who have studied the group with great care and razor-sharp scrutiny. Last year the EUISS also published a very insightful working paper which addresses the lessons of the Contact Group.[1] I like to invite you to skim through those results. Let me give you an overview of some of the results.

Understanding the Contact Group

The Contact Group was created since no existing international organization had the capabilities or authority to cope with the complexity of the piracy issue. The group provided 3 core functions

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[1] http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/fighting-piracy-off-the-coast-of-somalia-lessons-learned-from-the-contact-group/

1) Legitimacy: It provided a missing link between the UN Security Council, authorizing activities, and the organizations and states putting this mandate into practice. Having this link avoided tensions between implementing parties, which include a range of parties usually cooperating not so well, such as NATO, Russia and China.
2) A shared understanding of situation: The Contact Group created a shared knowledge base and interpretation of the situation among states and organizations active in counter-piracy. This was achieved through developing a legal tool kit and frequent information exchange in the working groups and plenary meetings.
3) Trust and Confidence: In essence the group created a community of counter-piracy practitioners with strong personal links, given the frequency and density of meetings. This spurred an environment which enabled trust and confidence among participants. This is a precondition for cooperation.

The group worked with three principles: inclusivity, experimentalism and functional segregation.

1) Inclusivity implies that membership was open to all actors with a role in counter-piracy (including not only states, but also NGOs and the industry).
2) It was based on experimentalism since working procedures were flexible and centred on trying things out that might work to tackle piracy. The group hence continuously re-invented itself.
3) The group worked within functional segregation and designed a multi-layered approach through which specialists in a domain (such as international law) could work in a focussed environment.

Let me closer scrutinize the coordination of operations.

Operational Coordination

We firstly, had four types of contributors: three multilateral missions, independent deployers (such as China or Russia) and regional states the majority without blue water or seagoing capacities (such as the Seychelles). The role of regional states is often forgotten, but they are vital notably for a long term strategy. These contributors coordinated via the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction mechanism, or SHADE, through frequent physical meetings. Day-to-Day operations are coordinated through the Facebook of counter-piracy, known as the Mercury platform. Mercury provides chat facilities as well as operational updates. The coordination with the shipping community is mainly handled by the EU run Maritime Security Centre Horn of Africa which is linked to both SHADE and Mercury.

All of these actors also participate in the Contact Group, yet with different representatives. If SHADE and Mercury includes operational staff, the Contact Group is attended by higher level diplomatic representatives. The CGPCS and its working groups clarified the legal basis for counter-piracy, enabled a flow of information, joint interpretations of the situation, as well as the operational needs. Via the plenary and its communique this shared understanding was not only fixed, but also fed into the UN Security Council.

Figure 1: Operational Coordination and the CGPCS
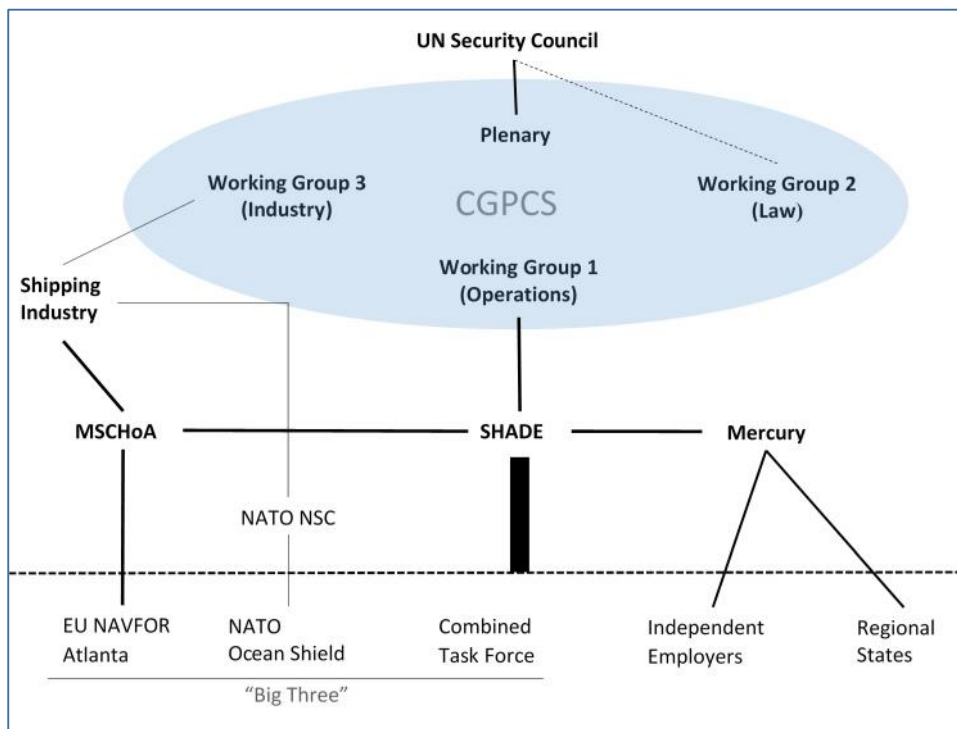
What is unique here? This is firstly the degree of information sharing and opportunities for developing joint understandings of the situation across levels through formats such as Mercury, Shade, the Working Groups, or the Plenary Secondly, the level of flexibility. States and organizations can in essence decide how they want to contribute while there is a minimum degree of coordination, notably ensured through Mercury. It enables regional states with weak capacities to participate. It even allowed unrecognized entities such as Somaliland or Puntland to be part. It also enabled informal cooperation, such as the unprecedented (informal) NATO-EU coordination. Thirdly, it recognizes the industry as a core actor and coordinates closely with private actors on the level of operations, but also policy.

Now what are the benefits? Allow me to speculate here a bit. How would the Libya operation and Operation Unified Protector have played out if a similar system would have been in place? I suggest that the alienation of Russia and the African Union could have been avoided, and productive links to the political groups in Libya as well as the oil industry build. This would have enabled a transition strategy, and most likely Libya would be in a different situation today.

General Lessons

I think the unique story of the Contact Group and of counter-piracy raises some general points.

1) Security governance systems which are issue-specific, flexible and experimental help avoid legitimacy gaps, ensure inclusivity and ownership, allow for better information sharing, and trust and confidence building.
2) Multi-layered approaches ensure that problems are tackled at the level of specialization which is most appropriate to the problem at hand while ensuring overall coherence.
3) Day-to-day information sharing matters. Communication platforms such as Mercury should be further developed and used in other contexts.

4) The industry is a core actor, not only in maritime security. New means of coordination between industry and military actors require to be developed and tested.
5) Piracy was a powerful reminder of how vulnerable the backbone of globalization, the international sea is. More energy is required for understanding the implications of the new maritime security agenda for international security. If the challenge of the 1990s was how to deal with the new wars, and the challenge of the 2000s was how to respond to international terrorism, I think the challenge of this decade is how to respond to maritime insecurity.

This brings me to my final point. The Contact Group was an experiment and the Lessons Learned project was as well. I think one of the broader lesson is that policymakers and academics can collaborate better, and they can work productively together. The fact that I am briefing you here today is evidence for this. There is some long cultivated alienation between security organizations and academics, a situation that I think should change. It is time to run further experiments together.

I like to thank you for your attention and look forward to your questions.

Christian Bueger is Reader in International Relations at the School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University. He researches contemporary piracy and maritime security extensively since 2010. He is one of the principal investigators of the Lessons Learned Consortium of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia. He is presently running a major research project on the governance of piracy and regional cooperation in maritime security funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. As part of the project he frequently travels the East African and wider Western Indian Ocean region. For informal inquiries he can be contacted at buegercm@cf.ac.uk. Further information is available at http://bueger.info