The Escort Mission against Somali Piracy in the Gulf of Aden and Possible Trilateral Naval Cooperation among South Korea, China, and Japan*

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Abstract

This article has explored a variety of issues related to Somali piracy and the necessity for the three Northeast Asian countries, South Korea, China, and Japan, to cooperate about it. While the Somali pirates contend that their attacks originate in the need to punish illegal vessels of foreign countries, this article points out that their indiscriminate attacks on international ships cannot be tolerated and that the growing number of attacks, hostage-taking, and ransom demands constitute a grave threat to international peace and security. The Security Council managed to come up with an international consensus that the Somali piracy and armed robbery constituted a threat to international peace and security. On the basis of this consensus, the Security Council has adopted a series of resolutions in which concrete measures were enumerated under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. The Security Council has become the focal point for mobilizing resources of the member states and the other international governmental and non-governmental organizations. In this connection, this article argues that the three Northeast Asian countries, South Korea, China, and Japan need to seize this opportunity to expedite trilateral cooperation in the maritime field on the basis of their past habits of cooperation and dialogues accumulated for a long time. In particular, it pays attention to the newly established Tripartite Cooperation Secretariat (TCS) as a dialogue forum for trilateral naval cooperation. In this way, the current situation in the waters off the coast of Somalia might be able to allow a cautious optimism about its eventual solution. Trilateral naval cooperation regarding the issue of Somali piracy might be able to bring a positive outcome to both the piracy issue itself and the long-standing disputes over islands in the region.

Key Words: Somalia, Piracy, UN Security Council, Combined Task Force (CTF)-151, Shared Information and Deconfliction (SHADE) Group, Tripartite Cooperation Secretariat (TCS)

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I. Introduction

The issue of Somali piracy and armed robbery in the Gulf of Aden has been high on the agenda of the international community. The pirates in the region would attack the convoys of the World Food Program carrying relief foods for the very famine-stricken Somali people and have consequently prompted international condemnation. In addition, they alarmed the international community by hijacking commercial ships, taking hostages of seafarers, and demanding ransoms. They are gradually using more sophisticated equipment including the GPS system and satellite phones and have become more audacious.

Somalia is located in the region of the Horn of Africa of which the sea routes historically cater to ships moving from Africa into the Gulf of Aden-Red Sea area. Ships used to pass fairly close to the Somali coast to make more economical passages. Before the Somali unrest, a number of Somali ports played host to ships sailing through this part of the Indian Ocean including Kismaayo, El Aolde, Merca, and El Man. Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia, also played the same role until it was closed to foreign vessels in 1995.

The Somalia Republic fell into a state of anarchy when the Siad Barre regime was overthrown by the resurgent clans in 1991. Thus, the rapid rise of piracy and armed robbery in the waters off the coast of Somalia stems basically from internal lawlessness. The naval task force associated with UN peacekeeping operations in Somalia (UNOSOM I and II) between 1991 and 1995 managed to monitor effectively the maritime traffic passing through the sea-lanes off the Horn of Africa. However, when the UN forces left in 1995, Somalia had no effective government and could not continue monitoring the waters off its coast, the country descended into a period of clan warfare. Thus, the most dramatic and unique feature of the Somali crisis has been appropriately characterized as “a failure among failed states.”

It was only in January 2007 that the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) was deployed again following its approval by the UN Security Council. The AMISOM has been supporting the previous Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the current President Mohamud’s regime. The international community, including the International Maritime Organization (IMO), took the initial actions and

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