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SECURITISATION OF MARITIME PIRACY IN THE GULF OF ADEN BY

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The talk examined the securitisation of maritime piracy in the Gulf of Aden, emphasizing its historical background, multifaceted security implications, and significant effects on both global interests and Indian maritime industry, with special attention to the nuanced role of traditional local vessels such as dhows.

Historical Origins and the Dhow's Role

Maritime piracy in the Gulf of Aden traces its origins to ancient patterns of seaborne activity, deeply intertwined with the region's geostrategic position adjacent to the Bab El Mandeb chokepoint - a critical artery for global shipping traffic between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Over generations, dhows, which are locally operated vessels characterized by their distinctive design, have been the backbone of the area's maritime landscape, used extensively for fishing, trade, and cargo transport. Dhows have not only been a lifeline for local coastal economies but have also factored significantly as cultural ambassadors. Due to their slow speed, low free-board and limited manpower made them vulnerable to attack by pirates; pirates often targeted dhows for hijacking due to their relative lack of security measures and then repurposed these vessels as motherships.

Patterns of Piracy and Ramifications

The dramatic escalation in piracy incidents along the Somali coast between 2008 and 2012, reached a peak with 439 recorded attacks in 2011 - a crisis that not only threatened international shipping lanes but also deeply affected the operation of dhows in the region. Although full-scale hijackings represented only a fraction of incidents, the overall threat level was sufficiently high to prompt major changes in commercial practices and insurance policies, including the widespread introduction of armed security personnel aboard merchant ships. This impacted regional economies adversely by disrupting established supply chains and raising the costs of maintaining secure passage for all vessels, including those central to local livelihoods.

Securitisation in International Relations

The concept of securitisation within international relations came to the fore. Securitisation refers to a process wherein a particular issue such as piracy is rhetorically framed as a critical, existential threat to national or international security. This framing provides political and legal justification for extraordinary responses, such as military deployment, intensified surveillance, and the enactment of policies that might otherwise be impermissible under standard conditions. In the maritime domain, the over securitisation of piracy resulted in the increased militarization of the Gulf of Aden, extensive international naval patrols, and excessive legal frameworks that altered and restricted the activities of local vessels like dhows. The dual consequences were clear: dhows faced both direct risks from pirates and indirect challenges as targets of sweeping security measures, further complicating the balance between local economic needs and overarching security imperatives.

International Responses and Root Causes

Following a watershed piracy event in the Gulf of Aden in 2005, the international community escalated its involvement in the region, employing a range of initiatives - most notably UN Security Council resolutions and joint naval operations by several nations, who either operated singly like India, Malaysia, China and Japan or a part of multinational forces. While these efforts contributed to the eventual reduction in piracy incidents, their effectiveness remained limited by a failure to address root causes on land, such as socio-economic deprivation, lack of viable livelihoods, and governance challenges pervasive in Somali coastal areas. Furthermore, ecological concerns - including illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and the indiscriminate dumping of waste - continued unabated, as no efforts were made by the international community to address them. The absence of comprehensive on-shore measures meant that, despite robust maritime intervention, piracy persisted as a symptom of deeper systemic issues that directly affected those reliant on dhows for economic survival.

Oversecuritisation

The prevalent condition resulted in over securitization also known as Hyper-securitisation. Various countries exploited the issue of piracy for military and financial gains beyond addressing the actual threat. Nations like China have used anti-piracy operations as a pretext to establish military bases such as in Djibouti and deployed naval assets like submarines and research vessels unrelated to

piracy control. Similarly, several extra regional powers like the USA, Russia, Malaysia and Japan have leveraged the situation to regain regional influence by regularly rotating naval deployments. This unnecessary over securitisation overlooked the root causes like illegal, unreported fishing (IUU) and unauthorized waste dumping in Somali waters, which exacerbated piracy. The securitisation of piracy especially by the vested interests, especially of the Western countries to exploit the situation financially by benefitting from increased insurance premium, sale of anti-piracy equipment, participation as negotiators in the transfer of ransom money, and providing armed guards etc. The per year cost of additional expenditure due to piracy was to highlight the actual ransom money was miniscule. Similarly, out of more than 22000 ships passing the Choke Point of Bab Al Mandeb every year, less than 100 ships were attacked even at the height of piracy. The actual number of hijackings were even lesser. There was a collusion between the military and the financial institutions to securitise the situation for vested interests at the cost of vulnerable shipping industry.

Strategic Implications for Indian Interests

The repercussions of piracy securitisation were especially pronounced for Indian financial and maritime interests in the wider Indian Ocean region. With mounting regional instability, Indian shipping faced heightened operational risks, leading to increased insurance premiums and costlier protective measures. The extension of High-Risk Area eastwards from 65 degrees Longitude to 78 degrees longitude in 2010, just on the basis of two isolated piracy incidents near Lakshadweep, resulted in substantial increase in the insurance premium for the ships calling Indian ports. This resulted in additional financial burden on Indian public. After Herculean efforts by the Government of India and the Indian Navy, this extended area was pushed back to 65 degrees longitude in 2015. These developments were acutely felt by Indian seafarers and dhow operators, whose capacity to work was disrupted as heightened surveillance and counter-piracy regimes altered traditional practices and strained local economies. The securitisation process thus presented challenges not only to commercial stakeholders but also to broader strategic objectives, calling into question the ulterior motive of the countries and shipping organisations who played crucial roles in securitizing the piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

Lessons for India

India needs to be careful of any security situation getting over-secritised by the vested interests in its neighbourhood, that could result in compromising its national interests. Indo-Pak military situation after Operation Sindoor could be securitised by raising the nuclear bogey by some western nation on the similar lines.