

POLICY BRIEF 06

Somalia's Waters Are Emptying of Navies Just as Piracy Returns. What Fills the Gap?

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Executive Summary

The international naval presence that suppressed Somali piracy from 2012 to 2023 has been redirected toward the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz since late February 2026, drawn away by the Houthi campaign and the escalating US-Iran confrontation. At almost exactly the same moment, commercial shipping fleeing Houthi attacks near Bab el-Mandeb has rerouted around the Cape of Good Hope, sailing directly past Somalia's coastline in greater volume than before. The result is the thinnest naval coverage of the Somali Basin since before Operation Atalanta stood up in 2008, layered under the most target-rich shipping conditions in over a decade. A cluster of six incidents between 21 April and 2 May 2026, including four hijackings, confirmed organised, shore-financed piracy has returned, not opportunistic drift. This brief examines the gap left by naval diversion and recommends scaling Puntland's existing counter-piracy capacity, rather than waiting for international navies that are unlikely to return while the Iran war continues.

The Issue

Somalia's coastline sits at the intersection of two crises it did not create. The first is the Houthi campaign against Red Sea shipping, which has pulled Combined Maritime Forces, EU Operation Atalanta and allied naval assets away from anti-piracy patrols and toward the Bab el-Mandeb corridor and, since the Hormuz crisis escalated in early 2026, further east toward the Persian Gulf. The second is the shipping industry's own response to that campaign: major carriers now route around the Cape of Good Hope rather than risk the Red Sea, a detour of two to three weeks and thousands of nautical miles that takes vessels directly past the Somali coast. Naval protection has moved away from the Somali Basin at the same time as commercial traffic has moved toward it. Four confirmed hijackings between 21 April and 2 May 2026, the first successful hijacking of a commercial tanker since the MV Ruen in December 2023, mark the end of what had been roughly two and a half years of relative quiet.

Background

Western Indian Ocean naval coverage had been thinning for approximately ten weeks before the 21 April boarding that opened the current cluster, with counter-piracy assets diverted toward the Hormuz and Red Sea theatres from late February 2026 onward. NATO's own dedicated counter-piracy mission, Operation

Ocean Shield, ended in December 2016 and was never reconstituted, leaving Atalanta and allied rotations as the backbone of what coverage remained. The April-May cluster documented six distinct incidents: four hijackings, comprising three commercial vessels and one dhow, one deterred armed boarding attempt, and at least two suspicious skiff approaches. The hijacked vessels included the product tanker MT Honour 25, carrying 18,500 barrels of refined oil, and the general cargo vessel MV Sward; a dhow was seized on 25 April in the southern Gulf of Aden, reportedly for use as a mothership, and a fourth incident on 28 April occurred roughly 500 nautical miles east of Mogadishu, consistent with an extended-range mothership operation rather than an inshore opportunistic attack. Further incidents have followed: the cargo vessel Lutuf was seized off Somalia's coast on 17 August 2026, and the tanker MT Asana was hijacked in the Gulf of Aden roughly a month earlier. Three geographic corridors show the clearest concentration: the Garacad-Eyl inshore stretch, with the highest boarding density and a roughly 83 nautical mile maximum inshore range; the southern Gulf of Aden; and extended-range operations up to 500 nautical miles offshore using the mothership model. Somalia already has one functioning, if narrowly resourced, maritime security force: the Puntland Maritime Police Force, funded and supervised primarily by the United Arab Emirates, with roughly 4,800 personnel against a stated target of 10,000, and additional training support from the EU's EUCAP Somalia mission. Originally established with a counter-piracy and maritime security mandate, the PMPF's operational focus has shifted substantially toward counter-terrorism in recent years.

Analysis

The geographic pattern in the incident data, concentrated inshore density at Garacad-Eyl, a distinct Gulf of Aden cluster, and a confirmed 500-nautical-mile mothership operation, indicates organised, shore-financed piracy networks reconstituting their pre-2012 business model rather than a temporary or opportunistic uptick. Pirates are showing a clear preference for vessels without armed security aboard, a pattern consistent with over a decade of counter-piracy experience and one that points toward armed guarding as a partial, if incomplete, mitigation. The rerouting paradox is the analytically important point this brief adds to existing coverage: ships avoiding Houthi risk near Bab el-Mandeb are sailing directly through the exact waters where naval protection has just been withdrawn, concentrating more valuable, more vulnerable traffic into a protection vacuum at precisely the moment that vacuum opened. Puntland's Maritime Police Force represents real, already-standing capacity that could be redirected toward this gap faster than any international naval rotation is likely to return while the Iran war continues, but two structural weaknesses limit it: its recent mandate drift toward counter-terrorism competes for the same personnel and resources counter-piracy operations would require, and its dependence on a single external funder, the UAE, leaves it exposed to that funder's own shifting regional priorities rather than a diversified, durable financing base.

Policy Options

- Lobby international partners for restored naval rotations dedicated specifically to the Somali Basin, separate from Red Sea and Hormuz commitments. The historically most effective option, but competes directly with theatres that are not becoming less urgent while the Iran war continues, making near-term restoration unlikely.

- Scale and re-task the Puntland Maritime Police Force back toward counter-piracy as a distinct, resourced mission line, with funding diversified beyond the UAE. Builds on existing, already-trained capacity, but requires a mandate decision and new funding partners.
- Expand privately contracted armed security aboard commercial vessels transiting the highest-risk corridors. Directly responsive to the data showing pirates avoid armed vessels, but does nothing for dhows and regional fishing traffic, and raises cost and legal-liability questions for shipowners.
- Establish a standing regional coast guard coordination framework linking Puntland, Somali federal maritime forces, Kenya and Djibouti. Addresses fragmentation directly, but has no existing institutional home and would take considerably longer to stand up than redirecting an existing force.

Recommendations

- Prioritise near-term scaling of the Puntland Maritime Police Force's counter-piracy capacity as a distinct, funded mission line separate from its counter-terrorism role, since it is the fastest-standing option relative to waiting for diverted international navies to return.
- Diversify PMPF funding beyond the UAE by actively soliciting EU, flag-state and shipping-industry contributions, given how exposed a single-funder model leaves the force to that funder's competing regional priorities.
- Press international partners and the IMO to treat Somali Basin coverage as a distinct commitment from Red Sea and Hormuz operations in their own right, rather than a lower-priority line item to be drawn down first, given the documented target-rich conditions the Cape rerouting has created.
- Support flag states, insurers and shipping associations in funding a temporary escort or convoy mechanism for the highest-risk corridors identified in the incident data, Garacad-Eyl inshore and the extended offshore mothership range, rather than assuming state navies will fill the gap.
- Require and resource AIS monitoring and information-sharing between commercial shipping, insurers and regional maritime authorities specifically to detect mothership-model attacks earlier, given the 500-nautical-mile extended-range pattern already documented this year.

Conclusion

Somali piracy's return is not a mystery and does not require new intelligence to explain: the navies that suppressed it left, and the ships they used to protect are now sailing closer to shore than before. Waiting for the Red Sea and Hormuz crises to resolve before restoring Somali Basin coverage treats the gap as temporary when the underlying regional confrontation shows no sign of near-term resolution. Puntland's Maritime Police Force is the one piece of standing, trained maritime security capacity Somalia already has. The immediate policy choice is whether to fund and re-task it now, or wait for a naval rotation that current regional priorities make unlikely to return soon.

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