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Insurgency goes to sea: Indicators and lessons for Mozambique

Background

The literature on insurgency and terrorism at sea is not prominent and empirical works even less so. While research on the topic leans towards descriptions of particular cases like Sri Lanka, Yemen and also Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, as well as studies to demarcate particular features of each, [Asal and Hastings](#) conducted an empirical study in *When Terrorism Goes to Sea: Terrorist Organizations and the Move to Maritime Targets* on indicators of irregular forces shifting their tactics to include maritime targets. The discussion below first covers their suggestions on the 'why' followed by the outcomes of their empirical work before concluding with some comments on events in Mozambique.

Discussion

Africa's coastal waters reflect several cases of irregular forces extending their actions offshore. Nigeria and Somalia are well known while [Yemen's Houthi rebel group](#) is probably the most explicit example of an irregular armed group executing deadly attacks at sea in the north-western Indian Ocean and close to African maritime waters.

In their exposé Asal and Hastings argue that certain dynamics are at play in choosing to include offshore targets in an irregular campaign. Opportunities to interface one's own operations with lucrative criminal networks and their knowledge hubs, as well as their skills is one scenario. Piggybacking on crime networks generates funding streams whether by reciprocal agreements or by terrorist movements learning to conduct their own offshore actions. Furthermore, irregulars that are well integrated within broader irregular actor networks and supported by state actors to gain access to the logistics associated with maritime operations collectively hold a better potential to operate offshore as well. In exploring these kinds of connections, Asal and Hastings examine five possible indicators more closely:

- state sponsorship;
- size of the organisation;
- degree of networks with other similar or like-minded organisations; and

- involvement in the drug trade and control over territorial areas bordering the coast.

The above alternatives support more plausible explanations for understanding why and how irregular actors opt to include maritime targets and objectives. Collectively the said indicators give some impression of the inclination, capacities, and resources to operate offshore as well. Overall, the authors posit that for insurgent and terrorist groups to operate offshore decisions are rather a function of capabilities than ideology given the complexities involved in attacking targets at sea. Ideology brings drive, but as found in the case of the [failed first attempt to attack a US naval vessel in Yemen](#), the ideological drive is no certain substitute for mastering the technicalities involved in executing attacks at sea.

When controlling for indicators deemed indicative for considering maritime targets in operations, the following emerged: First, no single indicator appeared to be significant on its own. Religious motivations appeared to be important, but their overall effect was not as influential as expected. Networking with similar or like-minded organisations emerged as more significant and particularly the effect of information sharing and learning. Ideology also did not appear as dominant, but what transpired is that moving to maritime attacks on civilian and naval vessels showed no clear preference for mass civilian casualties. Attacking a maritime target appears to hold a value of its own as at sea the wider ripple effect of such actions upon the maritime community must not be underestimated. Another important finding flagged the right capabilities, rather than large 'supplies' of knowledge and equipment and finances. Control of territory was also noteworthy. Operating in littoral countries and edging out territory bordering the oceans seem to fuel or reinforce an inclination to operate at sea. In addition and pointed out by [Abdullah and Sidhu](#), a facilitating geography as found in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea helps irregulars with reach to threaten shipping confined to narrow seas and straits.

One salient indicator emerged from the analysis: Involvement in the drug trade made maritime attacks more probable. This propensity ties in with the infrastructure, platforms, and traditional routes employed to use of the sea for these criminal enterprises. The crime domain brings maritime capabilities of knowledge, hard and soft infrastructure and platforms into the irregular realm and this even includes basic submarines as shown in the case [of cocaine cartels from South America](#) that now also target Mozambique and *dhow* platforms and routes to smuggle heroine from Pakistan and Afghanistan through the Western Indian Ocean to [Mozambique](#). A second indicator that caught the attention is the density of connections with other similar organisations that enables a learning curve on new knowledge and experiences to reinforce opportunities and capabilities that combine with the knowledge ambit of drug smuggling.

Synopsis: Is Mozambique exposed to maritime attacks by insurgents in Cabo Delgado?

Several pieces of literature appeared on possible maritime threats emanating from the Cabo Delgado insurgency in Mozambique. Collectively the said literature largely warns of possible threats and their implications given the small number of attacks against mostly coastal targets that already took place. The analysis done by Asal and Hastings nonetheless intersects with insurgent events in Cabo Delgado in some ways.

The insurgency in Cabo Delgado is verbally and symbolically associated with the Islamic State and al Shabaab, as well as African cells of the Islamic State in particular, but neither one has a history of attacks on maritime targets. Both however have their links to criminal networks using the sea as a landscape to facilitate and fund their operations. Furthermore, the powerful religious connection tied to the importance of possible learning exchanges between such networks must be kept in mind.

The right capabilities play a role and although the insurgents in Cabo Delgado do not have a known external backer of note, other avenues that offer resources with a maritime utility could well be a hidden catalyst. Furthermore, the Cabo Delgado insurgency with its religious-ideological connections does border onto the Mozambique Channel and collectively this points to a motivation and geographical proximity for maritime attacks. The backer-proxy relationship of Iran and Hezbollah with Houthi rebels in Yemen show the danger and reality of how backing, networks and learning alongside solidarity and the transfer of the right capabilities to irregular forces make possible attacks on shipping and even naval vessels.

Cabo Delgado is known for its [nexus with the maritime-based drug trade](#) embedded in historic maritime routes through the WIO. This established criminal enterprise with its deep knowledge of local waters and skills to operate vessels at sea, networks with other criminal syndicates in Mozambique as depicted in the [ENACT report](#) together underline the importance of this indicator identified by Asal and Hastings. This serves as an input for planning maritime attacks by using the available knowledge and skills of the smuggling networks as well as the financial flows at play.

While the verdict on Mozambique remains in limbo, events in the Niger Delta demonstrate how the geography and skills of crime syndicates to operate on water landscapes strengthen capabilities of insurgent elements to operate out to sea and conduct robberies and hostage-taking, extract finances and promote their cause. Off Yemen outsider backing with appropriate logistics, religious harmony and a conducive geography show a different set of attributes underpinning a move to maritime attacks. In combination, the above offer different perspectives for decision-makers to consider the danger of maritime threats off the coast of Cabo Delgado.

Additional reading material:

Victor Asal & Justin V. Hastings (2015) When Terrorism Goes to Sea: Terrorist Organizations and the Move to Maritime Targets, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 27:4, 722-740.

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