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View Point

Combating Somali Piracy: Building India-Africa Partnership

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During the recently concluded II Africa-India Summit at Addis Ababa on May 24 and 25, 2011 India and Africa expressed serious concerns at the increase in incidents of piracy and sought intensified international cooperation to snuff out the menace. The eight page Addis Ababa Declaration adopted at the end of the two day summit “unequivocally condemned terrorism and piracy in all its forms and manifestation” and called for “active prosecution of authors of such crimes”. India’s call to the African countries for joint action to combat the twin scourge of terrorism and piracy in the Indian Ocean region, has added a strategic depth to its relations with African countries, and reflects India’s keen desire to play a more proactive role in solving the Somali piracy crisis

Increase of piracy in Somalia waters has been a threat to international shipping and commercial seaborne trade. At present about 95 percent of the piracy in international waters is done by Somali pirates. The area has now overtaken the Straits of Malacca in Southeast Asia Moreover it has become an organized industry with pirates acquiring new levels of confidence where they are trying to negotiate prisoner exchange. A recent incident is a case in point where the pirates decided to retain seven Indian sailors as hostages after releasing the ship and receiving the full ransom from its Mumbai-based owner, in order to negotiate the release of 120 Somali pirates held in Indian jails. Analysts say that this new assertiveness on the part of

pirates could be a result of the encouragement they get from terrorist groups. There are fears that the ungoverned territories of Somalia could become a terrorist state financed by pirate revenues. This further raises concerns about the security of the Indian Ocean region

As far as India is concerned India has a strong interest in ensuring the security of maritime traffic as piracy incurs a tremendous cost on India's maritime trade and threatens its prospects as a trading superpower. India's trade that passes through the Gulf of Aden estimated at about 110 billion dollars annually. And about 24 Indian-flagged merchant ships transit the Gulf of Aden every month. Moreover, more than six percent of seafarers engaged in international shipping companies are Indian nationals

The responses to deal with the threat of piracy in Somalia waters so far have been military and police action. India on its part has been maintaining a naval presence since 2008 in the piracy prone areas in the Gulf of Aden and has been rendering assistance to merchant ships irrespective of the nationality. Besides naval presence India had also proposed a five point plan to the UN Security Council to tackle the problem of piracy off the coast of Somalia which includes the following (i) Reinforcement of tracking the trail of ransom money to different parts of the world as entrusted to the Interpol. (ii) Prosecution of the beneficiaries of ransom money for abetting piracy. (iii) Consideration of the conduct of the naval operations under the UN as the preferred option (iv) Sanitisation of the Somali coast line through identified corridors and buffer zones and tracking of fishing vessels around the Somali coast and (v) Enactment of national laws on priority to criminalise piracy as defined in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and the prosecution of suspected, and imprisonment of convicted, pirates apprehended off the coast of Somalia as required under resolution 1918 (2010). The five point plan although is a positive step, yet it would require larger time frame to execute it. Moreover to curb piracy these measures would not be sufficient.

A land based strategy is very important to deal with this growing organized industry of piracy. So far defensive and containment strategy in the high seas adopted by India along with others has been limited and has a short-term impact. The UN Security Council resolution 1851 adopted on 16 Dec 2008 authorises land-based

operations in Somalia by laying down that States and regional organizations could undertake all necessary measures“ appropriate in Somalia”, to interdict those using Somali territory to plan, facilitate or undertake such acts (of piracy). However despite this mandate there has been limited action to deal with the problem on land. It could be because of lack of national and collective will or could be because lack of interest on the place itself. It also could be for the fact that the nations in Africa do not want to overstretch themselves. Such an exercise would be costly and require commitment of troops.

Importantly for India, given its huge strategic interest in the Gulf of Aden, it is essential to partner with African nations to deal with this menace. In this context India’s call to the African nations in the II Africa- India Forum Summit at Addis Ababa to jointly combat piracy and a pledge for contributing \$2 million for the AU mission in Somalia stands significant. While continuing with the military action India should partner bilaterally with countries having stake in Somalia, particularly nations in the Greater Horn of Africa such as Ethiopia, Kenya , Tanzania and also multilaterally with AU and other international bodies to deal with this threat

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