

Why GAO Did This Study

Piracy and maritime crime continues to threaten ships off the Horn of Africa's east coast and in the Gulf of Guinea off Africa's west coast, putting seafarers in harm's way and costing governments and industry billions of dollars in ransom, insurance, and protective measures. The types and causes of piracy and maritime crime, as well as the African states' ability to address the problem in the two regions, differ. To help U.S. agencies coordinate efforts, the NSCS developed an interagency plan in 2008 to prevent, disrupt, and prosecute piracy off the Horn of Africa in collaboration with industry and international partners. GAO was asked to evaluate U.S. counterpiracy activities.

This report: (1) assesses how piracy off the Horn of Africa has changed since our 2010 review, and describes U.S. efforts to assess its counterpiracy actions, given any changing conditions; and (2) identifies trends in piracy and maritime crime in the Gulf of Guinea and U.S. efforts to address them, and evaluates the extent to which the United States has assessed its counterpiracy efforts in the Gulf of Guinea. GAO reviewed plans, activities, and data from 2007 through 2013 and interviewed officials from U.S. agencies, international partners, and industry, selected as a nongeneralizable sample for their involvement in counterpiracy activities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the NSCS, with the Secretaries of Defense and State, collaborate with the involved agencies to assess their efforts and to determine whether additional actions are needed to guide efforts in the Gulf of Guinea. The NSCS did not concur or non-concur with GAO's recommendations but provided an update on its planning activities.

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MARITIME SECURITY

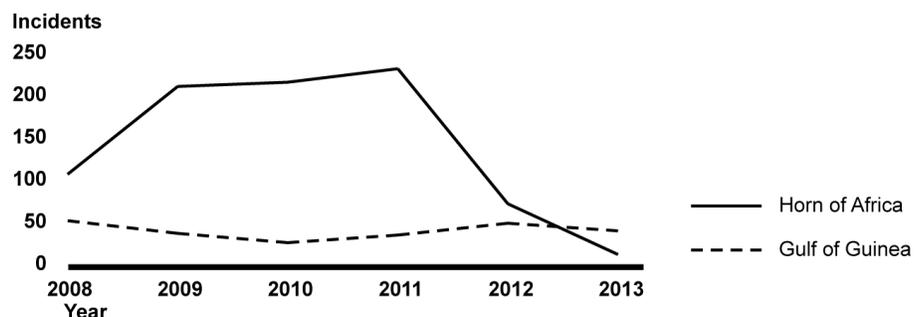
Ongoing U.S. Counterpiracy Efforts Would Benefit From Agency Assessments

What GAO Found

Piracy incidents off the Horn of Africa's east coast near Somalia have declined sharply since 2010, but U.S. agencies have not assessed their counterpiracy efforts as GAO recommended in 2010. Since 2010, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) reports piracy incidents declined from 219 to 15 in 2013. Similarly, from 2010 to 2013 hostages taken by pirates declined from 1,016 to 34. Also, a World Bank report stated that total ransoms declined by 2012. Officials participating in counterpiracy activities from the Departments of Defense and State, among others, as well as shipping industry officials and international partners, attribute the decline to a combination of prevention, disruption, and prosecution activities. However, officials cautioned that this progress is tenuous, and discontinuing these efforts could allow piracy to resurge. Despite changing conditions, U.S. agencies have not systematically assessed the costs and benefits of their counterpiracy efforts. Agency officials stated that their decisions and actions are guided by discussions rather than formal assessments. GAO has previously noted that assessments of risk and effectiveness in an interagency environment can strengthen strategies and resource usage. As such, GAO's prior recommendations remain valid and could help U.S. agencies identify the most cost effective mix of efforts and prioritize activities as they respond to changing conditions and fiscal pressures while avoiding a resurgence in piracy.

Off the west coast of Africa, piracy and maritime crime has been a persistent problem in the Gulf of Guinea, as shown in the figure below. Although the United States has interagency and international efforts underway with African states to strengthen maritime security, it has not assessed its efforts or the need for a collective plan to address the evolving problem in the region. The U.S. role in addressing piracy in the Gulf of Guinea has focused on prevention, disruption, and prosecution, through training and assistance to African coastal states. However, according to U.S. agencies working in the region, the National Security Council Staff (NSCS) has not directed them to collectively assess their efforts to address piracy and maritime crime. An assessment of agencies' Gulf of Guinea efforts could strengthen their approach by informing the appropriate mix of activities to achieve the most effective use of limited resources, as well as help determine if additional actions are needed.

Reported Incidents of Piracy and Maritime Crime, 2008 through 2013



Source: GAO analysis of International Maritime Bureau data. | GAO-14-422