1. Introduction: The International Response to Somali Piracy

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Piracy attacks on international shipping off the coast of Somalia attracted worldwide media attention from 2008 onwards. While piracy is far from being a recent phenomenon, the response to this particular instance of piracy is unprecedented in terms of the diversity of the actors involved. What is especially striking is the many different nationalities of the actors engaged in countering Somali piracy. The international aspect of the response to Somali piracy is the main theme of this book. The idea to publish a book on the response to Somali piracy was the outcome of an expert meeting on the same topic that was organised by the Netherlands Institute for International Relations ‘Clingendael’ in July 2009. The chapters in this book, apart from the introductory and concluding chapters, were initially presented as papers at the expert meeting. This book aims to provide policy makers, military personnel, academics, and students with an overview of the international response to Somali piracy. In doing so, it also intends to indicate which challenges Somali piracy poses to maritime security and where possible opportunities may be found to increase maritime cooperation.

The term ‘Somali piracy’ refers to the activities of Somalia-based groups who aim to generate income by attacking ships at sea. In practice the intended victims are mostly foreign merchant vessels sailing in the Gulf of Aden or in the Western Indian Ocean. The attackers are not – or at least not formally – linked to government authorities in Somalia, but can rather be characterized as gangs of private marauders. In addition to the internationally recognized but largely ineffective Transitional Federal Government of the Republic of Somalia (TFG), there are three other major governing entities in Somalia. These are the Islamist insurgency group al Shabaab in South and Central Somalia, and the de facto autonomous regional governments of Somaliland and Puntland in the north. The preferred method used by Somali pirates is to board ships, take the crews hostage, and to extract a ransom from the shipowner in return for the release of both the crew and the ship.

The international response to Somali piracy ranges from media coverage throughout the world to donor conferences to generate financial sources to invest in state-building initiatives in Somalia, as well as the international naval presence and adjustments to the insurance rates for maritime shipping. The challenges are numerous, and some will be dealt with in this book. This book is concerned mainly with actions taken at the international level to remove the threat of piracy and to minimize the damage it is causing. The main emphasis in this volume is on initiatives by foreign (non-Somali) and international governmental actors – primarily initiatives at sea but also those on land and in the legal sphere that are closely related or complementary to what is taking place at sea. Of course Somali actors and foreign non-state actors – especially the international shipping industry – are important players as well, but we will approach these primarily in relation to actions taken by foreign governmental actors.

Somaliland strives to be recognized internationally as an independent state, whereas Puntland aims to maintain an autonomous status within Somalia.