4. Operational Challenges to Counterpiracy Operations off the Coast of Somalia

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Piracy has a long history and is one of the oldest of all professions. Currently maritime piracy is experiencing a renaissance and has regained a prominence not seen since the period of the Barbary pirates that ended almost two hundred years ago. But why should one be surprised that the twenty-first century still has common criminals and muggers? In fact, piracy is nothing but a high-seas equivalent of street crime. In ancient Greece, piracy was widespread and it was regarded as an entirely honourable way of making a living. Even during the Roman Empire parts of the Mediterranean were infested with pirates. This provoked several naval and amphibious campaigns to suppress them. With the fall of the Roman Empire the incidence of piracy rose again and continued throughout the European Middle Ages. Well into the early modern and modern period, states would occasionally find it advantageous to align themselves with pirates for raids against their respective adversaries. The distinctions between pirates as criminals and privateers enjoying some authorisation by recognised states were fuzzy, to say the least. Privateers or corsairs used similar

1 The authors would like to sincerely thank Commodore Pieter Bindt, Captain Ruud Raemakers, Commander Henk van Monderen, and Commander Rob Kramer for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter. The authors remain solely responsible for the information presented.

methods to pirates, but acted while in possession of a commission or lettres de marque from a government or monarch authorizing the capture of merchant ships belonging to an enemy nation.

During the ‘golden age’ of piracy in the early modern period, pirates were often provided with lettres de marque by European governments when they were at war with each other, in an attempt to damage the enemy’s maritime interests. This formally transformed them from pirates into privateers, although when the wars ended the privateers usually returned to being pirates. In England more than one pirate-turned-privateer was knighted by the crown, most famously Sir Francis Drake. Drake captured the San Felipe on 18 June 1587. Laden with spices, silks, and ivory, it was one of the richest prizes ever seized. A well-known Dutch privateer was Admiral Piet Hein. In 1628 he sailed out to capture a Spanish treasure fleet loaded with silver from the American colonies and the Philippines. Sixteen Spanish ships were intercepted; one galleon was taken after a surprise encounter during the night, nine smaller merchant vessels were talked into surrendering, two small ships were taken at sea while attempting to flee, and four galleons were trapped on the Cuban coast in the Bay of Matanzas. After some musket volleys from Dutch sloops their crews also surrendered and Hein captured 11,509,524 guilders worth of booty in gold, silver and other expensive trade goods, such as indigo and cochineal, without any bloodshed. That is more than any Somali piracy hijack in the Gulf of Aden and Western Indian Ocean has yielded so far. Hein returned to the Netherlands in 1629, where he was hailed as a hero. An old Dutch verse memorialises him: Piet Hein, Piet Hein; Your name will always shine; In your little ships so neat; You beat the silver fleet; The mighty silver fleet from Spain.

Although evidently the definition of what piracy is has changed, the comparison with Somalia can be easily made, as

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