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The Hijacking of the MV Zirku: A Case Study in Shipping Security

By Sam Bateman

Synopsis

The recent hijacking of the crude oil tanker MV Zirku in the Arabian Sea bears some interesting lessons for shipping security.

Commentary

THE CRUDE OIL TANKER MV Zirku was hijacked by Somali pirates at dawn on 28 March 2011 just outside the Gulf of Aden approximately 250 nautical miles South East of the port of Salalah in Oman. The Zirku is just eight years old and about 105,000 deadweight tonnes - not large for a crude oil carrier. It is under the United Arab Emirates (UAE) flag, and the crew is a multinational one of 29 (1 Croatian, 1 Iraqi, 1 Filipino, 1 Indian, 3 Jordanians, 3 Egyptians, 2 Ukrainians and 17 Pakistanis).

At the time of the hijacking, the Zirku was on its way from Bashayar in Sudan to Singapore. It was attacked by two pirate skiffs firing RPGs and small arms. The ship took evasive action, increased speed, fired rocket flares and activated fire hoses, but the pirates still managed to come alongside, board and seize the ship.

All this may seem just another example of the recent successes Somali pirates have had with hijacking ships. However, several aspects of the Zirku incident make it an interesting case study in shipping security from which lessons might be learned.

Location of Attack

The Zirku was hijacked near the Gulf of Aden regarded recently as relatively secure due to the extensive coalition naval presence in these waters. Most recent pirate attacks have been further out in the Indian Ocean. The ship was just outside the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC) through the Gulf of Aden, but still well within the High Risk Area designated by the Best Management Practice (BMP) guidelines available to ships to deter piracy off Somalia.

Other recent pirate activity had been reported near where the Zirku was hijacked. The evening before, a pirate attack group of one dhow and a skiff had been reported about 120 kilometres to the northwest of the Zirku attack; at dawn the previous morning, another crude oil tanker successfully evaded an attack near where the pirate group was later reported. On that occasion, a skiff approached the tanker at high speed from a "mother ship". The tanker sounded the alarms, increased speed and contacted coalition naval forces while the crew

mustered in a secure citadel. The pirates aborted the attack after an onboard security team fired warning shots at the skiff.

The Zirku should have been aware of this recent activity near its course. Extra vigilance was required particularly at dawn - a time when many pirate attacks occur. However, it is surprising that coalition naval forces had not neutralised the nearby pirate attack group after it had been reported.

Initial reports suggest that the Zirku was doing most of the right things. It had registered with the Maritime Security Centre – Horn of Africa (MSCHOA) established by the European Union to provide a manned monitoring service for vessels transiting through the Gulf of Aden. It was also reporting to the UK Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) office in Dubai - the primary point of contact for merchant vessels transiting the area to liaise with military forces in the region.

It is not known, however, whether the Zirku had adopted any of the physical measures to avoid boarding recommended by the BMP guidelines, such as using razor wire to block off access points to the ship.

Ship Vulnerability Issues

Several factors may have made the Zirku more vulnerable to attack. Together these highlight some key issues with maintaining the security of shipping passing through piracy prone waters off the Horn of Africa.

First there is ship's speed. The Zirku's operational speed is reported to be 12.5 knots - relatively slow even for a crude oil tanker. This is well below speeds regarded as necessary for a ship to avoid boarding. As a slow, high value target, the Zirku's owners may have considered having additional security personnel onboard. The BMP guidelines do not recommend armed guards but having these onboard did protect the other tanker the day before the Zirku attack.

A second factor may have been the multinational nature of the ship's crew. The International Safety Management (ISM) Code requires that ship's personnel should be able to communicate effectively and that a working language be established for a ship. For the Zirku, this was probably English although it was not the first language of any of its crew. Any lack of the ability to communicate effectively would be a serious deficiency during an emergency, such as an attempted boarding by pirates.

The Port State Control (PSC) record of the ship is another issue. The last PSC inspection of the Zirku was by the US Coast Guard in San Francisco in August 2010. Six deficiencies were found, including one operational deficiency. This is a lot, particularly for a relatively new ship, and could indicate some deterioration in the standard of the ship.

PSC involves the inspection of a ship by port authorities to check compliance with required international standards of safety, maintenance, operations, crewing and security. It is the most effective way of determining that a merchant ship is properly prepared to go in harm's way in waters where piracy is prevalent.

Lessons to be Learned

None of this is to suggest that the Zirku was a sub-standard ship but there are some danger signals. It is hugely important that all ships comply with the BMP guidelines in all respects when passing through high risk piracy areas off the Horn of Africa. Ships should monitor communication networks closely for warnings of pirate activity along the ship's track. While armed security guards may not be required for most shipping traffic passing through the high risk areas off the Horn of Africa, slow moving, high value targets such as a large, loaded tanker, may be an exception.

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