Beyond Root Causes and Instrumental Rationality: Somali Piracy as Cultural Practice

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With the spread of piracy activities in the Horn of Africa and beyond, piracy has re-entered the international agendas as a major security and governance challenge. Security Studies scholars as well as International Legal theorists have recognized the importance of this challenge and there is a nascent body of literature. International legal theorists have elaborated that international law is in principle well equipped to cope with piracy, yet a range of practical dilemmas and implementation problems exist. Security Studies scholars in the majority have scrutinized current strategy against piracy, the meaning of anti-piracy operations for international actors, such as the European Union. In other words, the main deal of scholarly attention has been paid to understanding and improving current responses to piracy. These are worthwhile and indeed important undertakings, proving the political relevance of academic research. Yet, we find that there is a lack of research directed at understanding the behavior of pirates. Successful strategic thinking as well as planning for preventing future piracy campaigns will require sound knowledge of the emergence, organizational structures and practices of pirates. In this contribution we aim at filling this void. In relying on organizational sociology we shall argue to understand piracy as an emerging cultural practice. In adopting the community of practice approach we argue against both simple causal and instrumentalist explanations of piracy behavior. These cannot sufficiently explain the emergence and character of piracy. We shall focus on the case of Somali piracy as the current most dramatic case in numbers and the case that has received most political attention so far.

To elaborate a culturalist perspective on piracy we shall firstly discuss current literature interpreting the causes of piracy and the behavior of pirates. We find both strands of literature insufficient. They are too abstract and simplifying, do not provide any leverage to understand the collective character of piracy practice and its relation to the Somali context. We introduce organizational sociology as a mean to be better equipped to grasp these issues. We proceed in arguing that notably a community of practice approach can spur interesting insights. We proceed in delivering an analysis of the emergence of a community of piracy practice in Somalia. We argue that this process is best understood by distinguishing between three episodes. In the first episode we see the formation of piracy practice in Somalia as a complex interaction pattern between groups such as ethnic, business, governmental and security communities. In the second episode a significant legitimacy crisis for piracy practice occurs, which in turn led to a professionalization of piracy practice in the third episode. We ponder about the endurance and persistence of the Somali community of piracy practice. We end in arguing that although the Somali case is an explorative one only, the case demonstrates not only the value of an organizational sociology approach, but also spurs important insights in the late modern practice of piracy.

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