SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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Understanding Maritime Ratlines

Chris Rawley

On a balmy night in July 1927, armed only with revolver, three rounds, and some gumption, Coast Guard Ensign Charles Duke single-handedly boarded a rum-runner, took charge, and ran her aground in New York Harbor. This raid foiled the delivery of 150,000 gallons of booze with a street value of $50,000, no doubt disappointing speakeasy patrons throughout the five boroughs. Across their histories, America's maritime services have engaged in repeated and sometimes persistent efforts to stem the flow of illegal commerce on the high seas and inland waters. Daring interdictions such as Ensign Duke's demonstrated an audacious, albeit futile, approach to maritime law enforcement.

A more recent example of what appear to be futile maritime interdiction efforts involves the Navy's enforcement of UN sanctions against Iraq from 1991 to 2003. During this time, the Navy made over 40,000 queries, boarded over 17,000 ships, and diverted approximately 2,000 of them. Yet only a small percentage of smuggled contraband was actually stopped from these efforts, at a cost of millions of dollars a year to American taxpayers. Worse still, Iraq illegally earned over $10 billion from oil smuggling and kickbacks from a clandestine network of firms trading during the UN's Oil for Food Program between 1997 and 2002.[1]

Similarly, Coast Guard and Navy interdiction operations to stem the flow of illegal narcotics transiting the Eastern Pacific and Caribbean appear to have made little impact into the overall amount of drugs flowing across US borders. According to the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, the amount of cocaine moving through these areas increased from 1,022 metric tons in 2006 to 1,421 metric tons in 2007. During the same time period, interdiction forces increased the amount of drugs seized from 256 metric tons to a record high of 316 metric tons. Despite this apparent increase in performance, the drugs actually taken off the street remain in the low twenty percent range.

Illicit ratlines thrive in sea lanes around the world today, although the stakes to America's national security and our international partners are potentially much higher than those involving bootlegged rum. In the worst cases, maritime ratlines support the nefarious activities of terrorists, insurgents, and rogue states against US and allied national security interests.

These networks work in conjunction and in competition with legitimate maritime commerce to move men, money and materials globally. People illegally transported at sea include terrorist foot soldiers and their leadership, and human smuggling (refugees) and trafficking (slavery). For

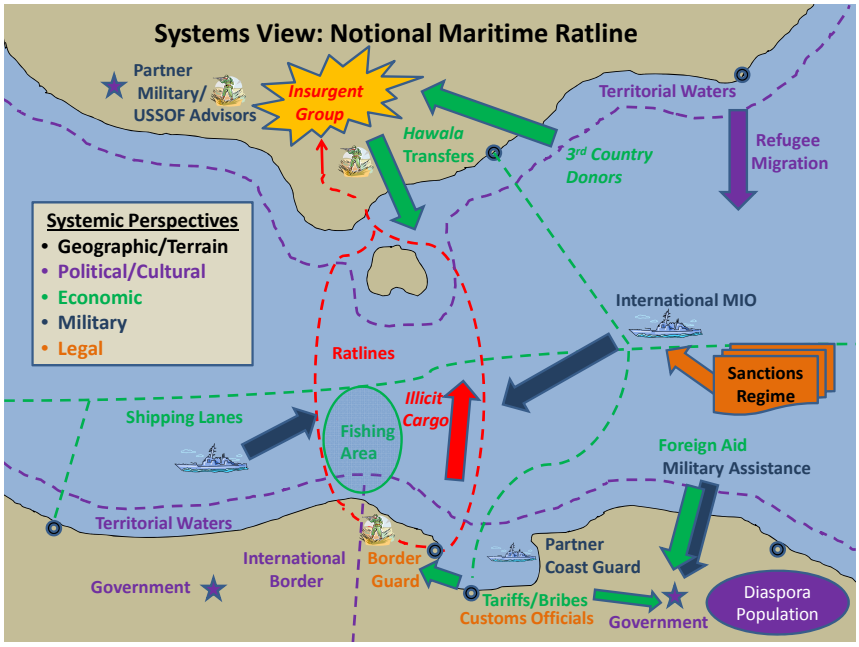
[1] Sachs, Susan. "Hussein's Regime Skimmed Billions from Aid Program." *New York Times*. February 29, 2004

example, each year thousands of Somali refugees pay anywhere from $30 to $120 per person to make the perilous 30 hour journey from Bossaso to Yemen in less-than-seaworthy vessels.[2] Monetary instruments smuggled at sea include illicit commodity-based trade such as oil or drugs, and bulk cash transfers. Weapons (small arms, proliferated missiles, IED and WMD components or precursors) might be considered the most dangerous materials moving through maritime ratlines.

Maritime routes may connect numerous countries, cross geographic combatant commander boundaries, and involve more than one group or network. Ratlines evolve to support criminal enterprises, insurgencies in fragile states, terrorists, and are sometimes facilitated or utilized by rogue states. As maritime geography is constant, many of these lines of communication have been in place for hundreds, if not thousands of years. The same routes used to transport refugees between Somalia and Yemen were once part of a huge maritime network that moved spices and other goods throughout Asia and Europe, connecting various points along the Silk Road.

Systemic Understanding

The traditional view of ratlines suggests a linear path of smuggled cargo from point A to point B. Rather than simply viewing these routes geographically, a systems perspective will help unravel the complexity of the ratlines. This approach should integrate different frames of perspective such as trade and commerce, governmental actors, cultural considerations, and legal frameworks. A systems view of a notional smuggling route is shown below, demonstrating the potential complexity of what might traditionally be viewed as the simple movement of contraband from one country to another across a sea lane.



[2] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Somalia. *Human Smuggling and Human Trafficking in Somalia*. 21 November, 2007. http://ochaonline.un.org/OchaLinkClick.aspx?link=ocha&docid=1083800

Like their land-based counter-parts, maritime ratlines sometimes originate or terminate in countries where they are unable to be interdicted due to political or military reasons. Additionally, poor governance factors into the support of illicit networks, to include weak legislation and law enforcement, corruption, and complicit customs officials. Insurgents, criminals, and terrorist using illicit sea routes also understand that laws, policy, and public opinion sometimes hamper US will to act and exploits these limitations by securing sanctuaries in our own ambiguity and interagency seams.

Undertaking analysis of an illicit network's environment beyond the movement component will assist in framing systems of opposition such as supply versus demand, border controls versus free trade, illicit versus legitimate commerce, land versus sea nodes, tribal/clan/familial bonds rather than political ties, etc. These tensions might exist externally to the movement of goods, but can be equally, if not more important to understanding the overall network and shaping an eventual campaign to counter it. Accordingly, intelligence collection should include the periphery of the network, not just the central routes.

Supply Chain Disruption

Viewing these routes as maritime supply chains may also provide some understanding. Supply chain management is a business practice that works to manage risk in the movement of goods through commercial networks, from their point of origin to their inclusion in finished products. In an effort to improve knowledge of the enemy's network, campaign designers should ask themselves the following questions:

- How agile and flexible is the enemy's supply chain?
- Do we fully understand the dependencies within the network's supply chain?
- Have we identified the weak links or single points of failure that increase risks to the ratline?
- Do we understand the risks that were inadvertently built into the enemy's supply chain and can they be amplified to our advantage?

As with commercial supply chains, external factors, such as weather, or maritime interdiction efforts can delay or slow illicit maritime routes, but will not defeat them completely.

Applying Operational Art

A creative use of operational design will indicate the appropriate course of intervention to deal with a smuggling route. Operational campaigns should be designed to inject energy that creates turbulence at appropriate points in the network. These interventions might consist of any combination of traditional interdiction, a swarm of interagency activities against various network nodes, and kinetic targeting, both on land and sea. The desired action may not always be to interdict or disrupt a ratline, but might include redirecting, co-opting, buying off, or otherwise leveraging nodes of the network.

Of all the possible options, complete network defeat is probably the most difficult. Dismantling a non-state network is a methodical process that involves actioning network nodes to the point of

collapse rather than just taking out individual endpoints (smugglers, in this case). Countering non-state networks is unlike a *Guerre de Course*, where the enemy's merchant tonnage is limited by its economic capacity. In World War II, US submarines had pronounced effects against Japanese shipping, because they sank ships faster than they could be rebuilt. However, maritime wars of attrition against a stateless enemy with a nearly unlimited supply of small merchant traders or fishing dhows are a losing proposition. If the money in the illicit trade is good, and the risk of death or long term imprisonment low, these smugglers will be replaced by others in short order – or return to work when they are "back on the streets," following the inevitable catch and release we see so frequently in international sanctions enforcement today.

Flat Networks and Government-wide Approaches

Clearly, maritime ratlines are complex, and require a comprehensive approach to counter. Joint and naval planners should look towards some of the approaches which have evolved over the past several years of working to dismantle to terrorist networks. Traditional hierarchical chains of command can be too stove-piped and cumbersome to address rapidly evolving stateless networks. Organizations should be flattened and communities of interest should be expanded into non-traditional, non-military partners.

At the tactical level, naval forces should be prepared to coordinate hand-offs to partners operating within 12 mile territorial waters, be they other countries not hampered by legal or political limitations, US special operations forces operating in-country, or surrogate maritime partners. These partners can action targets in places where it is neither politically or logistically feasible for unilateral operations. That said, the US Navy would do well to procure vessels designed to operate in green water as current vessels are too few and have drafts too deep to operate in the areas frequented by many maritime smugglers. In cases where it is politically unacceptable or infeasible for a US Navy presence within another country's territorial waters, US naval advisors should be embedded with local coast guards or naval forces. Small teams of language qualified embedded Sailors with foreign maritime forces at operational staffs and tactical forces who are networked with each other in a flat organization will allow rapid sharing of information and facilitate action.

Joint and interagency assets must also be leveraged by naval operational planners involved in interdiction, starting with country teams in areas contiguous to the interdiction effort. Embassies provide an abundance of resources including intelligence, law enforcement, and information on patterns of commerce. JIATF South in Key West is one example of an interagency and international network involved in disrupting maritime ratlines, but as evidenced above, a number of external factors have limited its overall effectiveness.

At the policy and strategic level, naval forces involved in interdiction should coordinate with agencies such as the Human Smuggling and Trafficking Center (HSTC). HSTC is a fairly new agency charged by Congress with tackling smuggling, illegal trafficking of people against their will, and terrorist travel. Additionally, naval planners who aren't reaching out to non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and academia are missing out on a wealth of resources that could be tapped to help understand and defeat maritime ratlines.

Chris Rawley is an operations planner at US Special Operations Command's Interagency Task Force. He is also a commander and surface warfare officer in the US Navy Reserve, having served in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Persian Gulf, and Western Pacific.

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