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## Captain's Rescue Revives Debate Over Arming Crews

By KEITH BRADSHER  
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HONG KONG — A [spate of attacks](#) on ships off [Somalia](#) and [the rescue](#) Sunday of an American captain held hostage by [pirates](#) have reinvigorated a long-simmering debate over whether the crews of commercial vessels should be armed.

While the arming of merchant vessels was commonplace for centuries, it faded in recent decades because of ship owners' concerns about liability and the safety of their sailors.

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Despite repeated problems with pirates in the Strait of Malacca between Indonesia and Malaysia and now in the waters of the Arabian Sea, ship owners worried that their crews would be killed instead of held for ransom if the crews tried to defend themselves and failed.

But the expanding range and seafaring skills of Somali pirates are prompting some experts to start calling for changes. The killing by [United States Navy](#) sharpshooters of three Somali pirates during the rescue on Sunday of Richard Phillips, the American captain of the container ship Maersk Alabama, has further raised the stakes, with at least one Somali pirate on shore threatening vengeance on the next American seafarer captured.

Barry Parker, a shipping consultant in New York and former ship broker, predicted that an international agreement would be drafted to allow captains to keep firearms and distribute them to crew members during times of potential danger from pirates. International rules pushed through by the United States after the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, authorized captains to monitor maritime security in their vicinity and maintain their vessels at elevated levels of vigilance in response to dangers.

If that antiterrorism system were expanded to include piracy and ships were armed, Mr. Parker said, captains could be authorized to take greater measures. "The captain declares

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there's some elevated level and they open up the gun locker," he said.

But many ship owners, including those with vessels that regularly ply the waters off East Africa, remain deeply reluctant to allow any weapons on their ships, said Matthew Flynn, a shipping consultant in Hong Kong who works closely with ship owners in Asia and East Africa.

"I'm not sure people are convinced at all it's going to make ships or crews safer," he said.

Arthur Bowring, the managing director of the Hong Kong Shipowners Association, said that if ships carried weapons, they might draw attacks around the world from people seeking to steal the weapons.

Ship owners also do not want crews to be armed because few merchant sailors have combat training and because pirates with deep pockets from ransom payments will always be able to buy larger weapons than ship owners in any maritime arms race, said Mr. Bowring, who is also the chairman of the labor affairs committee of the International Shipping Federation, a trade group representing employers.

"If we arm our crews with light machine guns, they can probably buy heavy machine guns," Mr. Bowring said. "And if we buy light rocket launchers, they can buy heavy ones." The answer to piracy, he said, was better law enforcement ashore.

Most ports severely restrict vessels from having weapons on board, and changing those regulations in each country would be difficult, Mr. Flynn said. The United States Coast Guard has been especially wary, fearing that the weapons could be used for terrorist attacks.


Because a commercial vessel might stop in a dozen countries during a voyage, it would be hard for it to carry weapons if any port along the route forbade that, Mr. Flynn said.

International regulation of shipping has shifted heavily away from the countries that register vessels and toward the local and national governments at the ships' ports of call. This has made it even more complicated to come up with common international standards, because so many countries are involved.


Protecting tankers from pirates is especially difficult. They are a favorite target in Asia and Africa because they are relatively slow moving and may carry valuable cargo like gasoline and diesel, which are easily unloaded and resold.

Accidental fires are a constant worry for tanker crews, which train for them constantly. A tanker crew that is exchanging gunfire with pirates could run the risk of igniting vapors from the cargo, or the cargo itself, shipping executives have said.

Several safety features that have become widespread during the past decade could help lessen the danger from pirate attacks, ship security experts said.



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*Scott Shane contributed reporting from Washington.*

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