

Theme introduction

# Piracy and robbery in the Asian seas



Dolokana P. deon 3-III

John Kleinen and Manon Osseweijer

Maritime piracy has become a focal point of media attention. Together with governments and military experts, the media tends to link maritime piracy with international terrorism as an ongoing threat in the post-Cold War era. In particular the Strait of Malacca, the strategic sea-lane linking the oil fields of the Middle East and the production economies of East Asia and beyond, is portrayed as a future battlefield.

The media, however, has a tendency to overstate the issue on the basis of insufficient evidence - data supplied by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) and its UN counterpart, the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The absence of thorough research has led to the romanticization and misunderstanding of piracy to such an extent that, in many cases, fiction has overtaken reality. This is not to underestimate the difficulty of researching pirates. As Dian H. Murray observed: 'like other groups for whom written records are

anathema, detailed information on pirates and their lives is difficult to come by'. For 'what pirate would want to keep written accounts of activities which, if the records should fall into government hands, would automatically convict them?' (2002: 257)

This does not imply that social science research on robbers and pirates is impossible; maritime piracy, unlike maritime terrorism, can be regarded as one of many 'grey-area' phenomena. Like smuggling, gambling, prostitution, the trafficking of goods and people and petty crime on land, piracy exists in more or less organized forms in contexts of diminishing human security (Chalk 1997). Maritime Southeast Asia's coastal zones are increasingly characterized by environmental degradation, illegal fishing, high unemployment, migrant labour, smuggling, crime and prostitution. Piracy in this context is truly an economic activity, be it a business concerned with the transport and distribution of commodities rather than their production.

Academic workshops on maritime piracy have repeatedly stressed the need to view contemporary maritime piracy within what has imaginatively been called the 'tapestry of maritime threats'. Social scientists still need to fully understand the knots in this tapestry. While undertaking this research, academics should bear in mind that their purpose and priorities fall under the purview of scientific research, not Southeast Asian governments or private organizations. There is a need for research on the human dimensions of maritime piracy: the pirates and their socio-economic backgrounds.

The articles compiled here address different aspects of Asian maritime piracy in historical and contemporary perspective. Three articles address piracy in the past. Robert Anthony addresses the economic and cultural significance of piracy along China's southern coast in the early modern period, a co-habitation of rulers, peasants, fisher people and 'froth of the sea', as pirates were called. In Southeast Asia, many coastal zones and their hinterlands started out as frontier societies where all kinds of illicit activities took place; coastal areas were ruled for centuries by kingdoms that thrived on trade and raiding. In her article Esther Velthoen addresses the political implications of raiding for booty and slaves in Eastern Indonesia, and Dutch colonial attempts to suppress it. Ota Atsushi focuses on the role of piracy in transforming inter-regional trade patterns in the late eighteenth century, where local raiding groups competed and cooperated with the Dutch East India Company, British country traders and Chinese merchants. Three articles address contemporary maritime piracy. Eric Frécon defends the



necessity of studying everyday piracy out of the limelight of sensation and romanticism, and takes us on a journey to some of the pirates living in the vicinity of Singapore operating in the Strait of Malacca. Adam Young explores the interests and difficulties involved in formulating a workable international response to piracy in Southeast Asia's strategic sea-lanes, and brings the reader back to the timeless issue of poverty. Finally, Stefan Eklöf argues that piracy continues to exist precisely because it remains insignificant for the shipping industry - and for that matter, Indonesia - and concludes with a call for a broader research agenda on human insecurity in coastal areas.

The guest editors hope the issue of maritime piracy will remain on the international research agenda after the imminent link with terrorism and cataclysm has faded away. <

References

- Chalk, P. 1997. *Grey-area phenomena in Southeast Asia: piracy, drug trafficking and political terrorism*. Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence no.123. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Murray, Diane. 2001. 'Cheng I Sao in Fact and Fiction'. C.R. Pennell, ed. *Bandits at Sea: A Pirates Reader*. New York: New York University Press. Pp.253-282.

John Kleinen is senior lecturer at the University of Amsterdam, and affiliated to the Centre for Maritime Research (MARE). His current research focuses on marine and maritime developments in Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam. [kleinen@uva.nl](mailto:kleinen@uva.nl)

Manon Osseweijer is coordinator of academic affairs at IIAS, and of the IIAS-MARE programme 'Piracy and Robbery in the Asian Seas'. [m.osseweijer@let.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:m.osseweijer@let.leidenuniv.nl)



The front page illustration and all sketches in the theme, unless otherwise noted: Sebastien Brunel, 2004, watercolour on paper, 20x30 cm. He is based in Lyon, France. His webpage is: <http://seb.brunel.free.fr>



IIAS and the Centre for Maritime Research (MARE) at the University of Amsterdam are hosts of the programme 'Piracy and Robbery in the Asian Seas', an initiative to facilitate research, workshops and publications on piracy in Asia. Two workshops have been held to date: 'International Piracy and Robbery at Sea' at the 2<sup>nd</sup> MARE conference in Amsterdam in 2003, and 'Maritime Security, Maritime Terrorism and Piracy in Asia', co-organized by IIAS and ISEAS, in Singapore in 2004. Papers from these workshops will be published in edited volumes within the IIAS-ISEAS Series *Maritime Issues and Piracy in Asia*. The 3<sup>rd</sup> MARE conference in Amsterdam, 7-9 July 2005, will feature a panel on maritime risks including piracy. 'Ports, Pirates and Hinterlands in East and Southeast Asia', co-organized with the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, will take place in Shanghai, 10-12 November 2005. For more information, please visit: [www.iias.nl/piracy](http://www.iias.nl/piracy)