



Piracy: a critical perspective

Theme >
Discourse

Maritime piracy, especially in Southeast Asia, has recently attracted a great deal of attention in international media and among analysts. Contrary to popular impression, however, piracy is not a great or growing menace to international shipping, and as far as academic research goes, there are a range of more pressing issues that demand the attention of social scientists.

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To the casual observer of contemporary Southeast Asia, it may seem as if piracy and the armed robbery of ships is an increasingly serious, even alarming problem for international shipping. Especially since the beginning of the 1990s, piracy seems to have returned to the region after having been all but extinct for over a century. Over the past decade, numerous articles in international news media, including *The Economist*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review* have drawn attention to the problem, often with dramatic, even sinister undertones, reminiscent of the great tales of the sword-swinging buccaneers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries West Indies.

The main source of information on contemporary piracy, both qualitative and quantitative, is the Kuala Lumpur-based Piracy Reporting Centre operated by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB), a unit of the International Chamber of Commerce. The Centre, first founded in 1992, has the task – in addition to assisting victims of pirate attacks and investigating authorities – of collecting, analysing and disseminating information about piratical activity. In doing so, the IMB has succeeded, both in raising awareness among ship owners of the problem, and in drawing international attention. The IMB's annual piracy report, published each January for the preceding year, usually attracts a great deal of interest from the media and generates a string of articles in newspapers around the world. The thrust of the IMB's reports – and thus of most of the media reporting – is that piracy is a serious threat to international shipping, that the problem is increasing in numbers as well as in the incidence of violence, and that the authorities of the littoral states of the most affected regions, particularly Southeast Asia, are not doing enough to suppress it.

A closer look at the IMB's figures, however, shows that the problem might not be all that alarming after all – at least not in economic terms. In 2004, the Bureau

reported 160 cases of actual and attempted attacks on ships in Southeast Asia (ICC – International Maritime Bureau 2005: 4). Many of these, however, were little more than cases of petty theft against ships in harbour, with the perpetrators typically sneaking onboard to steal some cans of paint, ropes, engine spare parts or other supplies. Excluding hijackings of commercial ships – none of which have been reported over the past two years – and tugs and barges, the IMB estimates that the average haul of an attack is around US \$5,000 (Gottschalk & Flanagan 2000: 90), making the economic cost of most piratical attacks virtually negligible for the shipping industry as a whole.

For an individual ship, moreover, there is very little risk of being attacked while transiting Southeast Asia, even if the IMB's reported figures are doubled to take account of the 40-60 per cent of all attacks which the Bureau estimates go

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unreported. For example, in the heavily trafficked Straits of Malacca – frequently referred to as one of the most 'pirate-infested' seas of the world – the risk of a transiting ship being attacked was less than 0.1 per cent in 2003.¹

The combination of low risk and economic insignificance for the victims – that is, the shipping industry and insurance companies – is an important, but often unacknowledged, reason why piratical activity persists in Southeast Asia. There is little incentive for shipping companies to implement anti-piracy measures onboard their ships, even though many measures such as equipping the superstructure with proper locks and providing anti-piracy training for the crews would incur very little extra cost. Moreover, there is even less inter-

est from most shipping companies to cooperate with the authorities of the littoral states in curbing the problem. Representatives of the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia have long demanded that the international community and shipping companies share the costs of policing the Straits of Malacca against pirates. In spite of the support which such cost-sharing has in international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, it has met with little enthusiasm from most international actors involved – with the notable exception of Japan, which has funded a number of initiatives to provide training and resources to the law enforcement authorities in the region (see Bradford 2004).

Of more direct importance is the reluctance on the part of ship owners to report pirate attacks to the authorities or otherwise assist in the investigations of pirate attacks. In fact, many shipping

companies explicitly prohibit ship masters from reporting pirate attacks (Chalk 2000: 59-60). Apart from reflecting badly on the company's image, reporting a pirate attack may mean that the victim vessel is detained in harbour for investigation, while the cost of such delays may easily exceed the losses incurred by a pirate attack. Another problem for the investigating authorities is that when a group of suspected pirates are arrested, they sometimes can not be prosecuted because the witnesses – that is, the crew members of the victim ship – are not present at the trial. The reason for this may be either that the crew members are too scared or otherwise unwilling to testify, or that the shipping companies are unwilling to pay for their travel and other expenses to attend the trial, or both.

Representatives of the shipping industry have often accused the authorities of Southeast Asian countries – particularly Indonesia – of not taking the problem of piracy seriously. Well-founded as such allegations may seem, they need to be accompanied by a further question: why should they? With a coastline twice as long as the circumference of the earth, and with no more than a few dozen operating vessels to patrol its territorial waters, there are a range of more important problems for the Indonesian navy and marine police to tackle. Many of these, including the smuggling of people and goods, illegal fishing and degradation of the maritime environment due to human activity, have grown to alarming proportions in recent decades. The Indonesian government, for example, has estimated that the country loses US \$4 billion each year due to illegal fishing alone (*Suara Pembaruan*, 31 October 2002) – several times more than the estimated cost of all pirate attacks worldwide. The problem of poaching, moreover, is not only economic, but contributes to the rapid depletion of fish stocks in the region, pressing traditional small-scale fishermen to turn to bomb fishing, thereby destroying large tracts of coral reef. For Indonesia, such problems obviously pose a much greater threat to the maritime environment, human security and long-term economic development than the few hundred petty piratical attacks which each year befall international vessels in or around the country's territorial waters.

In times of scarce funding for the social sciences, academics need to carefully consider which issues to study. Piracy is certainly an interesting phenomenon worthy of academic attention, but as far as contemporary relevance goes, it is difficult to see why it should be given priority from publicly funded sources. Eliminating piracy is above all the task of various maritime law enforcement agencies, and in conducting their task they need to be assisted, not by social scientists, but by the victims of the pirate activity, including, first and foremost, the shipping industry. If, on the other hand, contemporary piracy in Southeast Asia is to be an object of study for the social sciences, it should be part of a broader research agenda, focusing not

only on piracy, but on human security and non-traditional security threats to maritime regions. Such an agenda would take its point of departure from the problems facing maritime regions and their inhabitants, addressing the impact of states and international maritime borders on economic and social activities and the interplay between human activity and the maritime environment. In that context, however, piracy may turn out to be little more than a footnote. <

Note

1. In 2004, the IMB (2005: 8-9) recorded 16 actual and 20 attempted attacks against steaming ships in the Malacca Straits. The calculation assumes that the real numbers are twice the reported, giving a total of 72 attacks, and that an average of 200 ships transited the Straits each day. This figure excludes intra-Straits traffic. See Ahmad (1997: 7)

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