

***Piracy in Southeast Asia: Trends, Hot Spots and Responses.* Edited by Carolin Liss and Ted Biggs. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2017. Hardcover: 179pp.**

The issue of piracy in Southeast Asia has been a vexed one since the problem rose to prominence in the 1990s. Much ink has been spilt, forests pulped and conferences endured to produce copious volumes on the issue. Unfortunately, much of the published output has been far from enlightening; often uninformed, uncritical or repetitive and derivative. It is too complicated a topic to be treated well superficially. Compared to the widely reported piracy problem off the coast of Somalia, the Southeast Asian variety is mired in much deeper levels of complexity and murkiness befitting the region's vulnerable maritime underbelly; seemingly unavoidably beset by criminality and corruption. My first thoughts on receiving this current review volume then, were of trepidation: Do we really need yet another volume on this topic? Happily, it seems, on the strength of this book, we do.

There is one caveat to be made, however, with respect to the book's timing. In the past year, from March 2016, a major new front has erupted in the Southeast Asian "piracy" equation, with repeated attacks reputedly carried out by the terrorist-cum-criminal clique, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), in the under-governed tri-border area of the Sulu-Sulawesi (Celebes) Seas. No fewer than twenty-two attacks have been recorded, with thirteen successful hijackings and almost sixty hostages taken for ransom. This is arguably the biggest development in Southeast Asian piracy in years, particularly as large bulk carriers and other merchant ships on international — as opposed to intra-regional — voyages have been increasingly targeted since October 2016. Yet only one chapter (not the one on the tri-border area) makes brief mention of the first attack. The timing of world events is not under the control of researchers. Indeed, such "externalities" to the publishing process are occupational hazards. It certainly is no fault of the editors, authors or publisher. Nonetheless, it is unfortunate that such a significant development in regional piratical activity, with its consequent political and operational implications for regional cooperation, has evaded capture and discussion in the current volume. It means that *Piracy in Southeast Asia*, despite its many merits, cannot be fully comprehensive.

Comprising eight substantive chapters, plus obligatory introductory and concluding chapters, this book nevertheless is agreeably concise.

Sam Bateman sets the bar high by analysing changes in piratical activity between 2005 and 2014, using the data produced by the International Maritime Bureau's (IMB) Piracy Reporting Centre (PRC) in Kuala Lumpur and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia's (ReCAAP) Information Sharing Centre (ISC) in Singapore. Unlike much of the academic literature and media reporting, Bateman critically outlines what the data actually means, in considerable detail. He explains anomalies such as discrepancies between IMB and ReCAAP data, and between different years of IMB data, with respect to the categorization of incident locations, particularly whether the incidents are recorded as having occurred in the Malacca or Singapore Straits, as opposed to either Indonesian or Malaysian waters. Bateman outlines the changes in types of reported incidents and their locations, with some emphasis upon anchorages, small coastal tankers, and tugs and barges. He usefully draws a direct link in the upsurge of incidents in 2009 and 2010 to the 2008–9 Global Financial Crisis, when many ships were withdrawn from service due to the downturn in trade and parked in anchorages manned only by skeleton crews, particularly in the eastern part of the Singapore Straits where no anchorage fees apply.

Further detailed analysis based on extensive fieldwork informs two excellent chapters by Ted Biggs on the types of piratical activity in Southeast Asia, and its growing professionalization; and by Karsten von Hoesslin on the practice and business models of petroleum and other liquid product theft. Biggs establishes three "classes" of piratical activity: opportunistic attacks, ship-to-ship transfer of liquid product, and both short- and long-term hijackings. Von Hoesslin explains the mechanics and economics of product theft from tankers or barges, outlining the many different parties involved in this particular activity, from the "foot soldiers" who carry out the actual boardings and product transfer through to the ultimate buyers of the stolen product. Contrary to some common arguments that piracy represents an act of desperation generated by economic deprivation, both authors demonstrate that much of the piratical activity in Southeast Asia is, in fact, a highly organized, complex, institutionalized and lucrative transnational criminal enterprise.

Andi Supriyanto's chapter on Indonesia's responses is insightfully honest in identifying that countering piracy has not been a security priority for Jakarta, which instead has been more concerned with reputational damage to Indonesia and the perceived "threat" of foreign actors seeking to take actions that might undermine the

country's sovereignty. In this latter respect, John Bradford explains how US initiatives to build regional counter-piracy capacity since 2004 have been remarkably consistent, despite occasional misunderstandings. Other chapters deal with Japanese responses, legal measures and the tri-border area. On the tri-border sea situation, Carolin Liss at least provides useful historical context to the current spate of attacks, outlining the added complication of politically motivated attacks by Filipino separatist groups.

Two criticisms that can be made are that there is unnecessarily repetitive generic discussion of IMB and ReCAAP data in several chapters, and likewise with discussions of legal issues related to piracy. The book could have better clarified at the outset that international law regarding piracy is well established, and that neither the IMB's often misleading use of the term "piracy" nor the International Maritime Organization's useful appellation of "armed robbery at sea" to describe acts carried out in territorial waters have legal standing. Such a clarification might have avoided a certain ambiguity apparent in some chapters. These are minor quibbles, however. And despite the caveat noted above regarding recent ASG attacks, the outstanding quality of the research and overall detail of analysis mean that this book will prove beneficial to experts as well as casual observers of regional maritime security.

---

CHRIS RAHMAN is Principal Research Fellow in Maritime Strategy and Security at the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS), University of Wollongong. Postal address: ANCORS, University of Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia; email: [crahman@uow.edu.au](mailto:crahman@uow.edu.au).