An Overview of Piracy in the First Decade of the 21st Century

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Abstract

The author offers an introduction to world piracy since the beginning of 2001, using the concept of “crime clusters” to treat major outbreaks of piracy during this time. Instead of viewing piracy through a historical paradigm, it is more useful to generate a contemporary map of the problem. This has been done by looking at regions which have recorded ten or more incidents in at least two of the last seven years.

Ten major areas of contemporary piracy are examined in turn, discussing representative attacks and major incidents. This combination gives an idea of the general modus operandi utilized as well as suggests the potential for major disruptions of maritime commerce. The piracy clusters considered are: (1) the Straits of Malacca, (2) Indonesia, (3) Malaysia, (4) the Philippines, (5) Vietnam, (6) Bangladesh, (7) India, (8) the Horn of Africa, (9) Somalia, and (10) the Niger Delta.

The author concludes by summarizing the current piratical threat and suggesting factors which could help predict future piracy hot spots. He suggests the utility of using this overview approach from time to time to reassess the situation.

I. Introduction

The end of piracy, after centuries, was brought about by public feeling, backed up by the steam-engine and the telegraph. The last relic exists today in China, where a nest of troublesome pirates still carries on the old trade in spite of the navies of the foreign powers.¹

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It has been well over 50 years since Philip Gosse made this statement in his *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on pirates and piracy. While it is clear that Gosse had in mind the Bias Bay piracies of the 1920s and 30s, his epitaph on piracy’s demise has proven premature. Far from having been driven from the seas by advancements in morality or by developments in transportation and communication, the crime returned to the international limelight in the early 1980s and has continued to spread and morph like a seaborne cancer.

At the same time, the international community has been hampered in understanding piracy by its attempts to play “catch-up.” During the 1920s, when the League of Nations Committee of Experts for the Progressive Codification of International Law paid some attention to the problem, piratical enquiries were delegated to a committee of two, made up of representatives of China and Japan. The clear implication was similar to that stated by Gosse; piracy was believed to have dwindled to become a “local problem,” which could be handed over to be dealt with by the governments of the Far East. Discussions of piracy continued to be dominated by the situation in the China Sea—indeed, the definition of the crime in the 1958 Convention on the High Seas is based largely on the earlier

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