
In 2012, the release of another book on maritime piracy is not likely to attract a great amount of attention. There are several reasons for this. First, books on maritime piracy have become a staple of the international political and legal publishing trade. Virtually every legal journal and publishing house has a stock of current books, articles, and commentaries produced largely in response to the problems in Somalia and the Horn of Africa. Second, and significantly, the world is suffering from a piracy fatigue, and after a number of years of high-profile hijackings, the marked drop in pirate activities off the Horn of Africa have given the global community an opportunity to shift its focus elsewhere. The current (2013) increase in attacks on shipping off the West African coast have not attracted the same degree of public interest, so one more look at piracy from an academic point is hardly newsworthy, unless it can link itself to the imminent release of a Hollywood film.

Notwithstanding that 2013 has not been a good year for Indian Ocean and East African maritime pirates, the publication of this book still warrants a serious consideration of its content and relevance, since maritime piracy is still a major threat to global seafarers, and still costs the world economy billions of dollars in direct and indirect expenditures to prevent piracy attacks. To properly evaluate this book it is necessary to consider why it was written, who wrote it, and its intended market.

As to the first, most books of this type fall somewhere on a spectrum that extends from an individual or collectively written comprehensive analytical study (i.e., textbooks) to a bound collection of papers and presentations given at some conference or workshop (i.e., proceedings). Somewhere in the middle are those books that consist of individually written perspectives on the subject that may be specifically commissioned, but are often just a reworking of the contributor's previous work. Since the present book falls into the latter type, its value will depend upon the specific expertise of each individual author, and the insights offered by their contribution.

The authorship stands out for a couple of reasons. First, the editors and lead authors have a recognized expertise in maritime piracy that definitely includes them in any “rounding up of the usual suspects.” Professor Beckman, while an
American, has a long-standing tenure at the National University of Singapore, which gives him both the academic qualifications and the subject in geographical expertise to be able to write authoritatively on maritime piracy in the region. His co-editor, Capt. (US Navy retired) Ashley Roach, was a Judge Advocate General officer with both operational and legal experience in dealing with piracy on a global basis. This gives them not only excellent scholarly credentials, but also a wider appreciation of the issues and problems, and the practical concerns of the shipping and marine security communities. Integrating a number of separate scholarly pieces is much more effective if your editors are subject matter experts as well.

The book has chosen a rather narrow focus for the study, and this may unduly restrict the potential readership both in terms of geography, to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region, and its historical relevance, to contemporary Somali-based piracy. If there is a major criticism, it is that the book missed the opportunity to provide a serious and comprehensive analysis of the first great outbreak of contemporary piracy: the attacks on Vietnamese boat people during the 1970s and 1980s. These attacks on refugees, while of small economic consequence to the rest the world, were by far the most serious in terms of loss of human life, with hundreds being killed each year during the worst of the attacks. The lack of effective legal and operational mechanisms to prevent this humanitarian crisis needs greater attention and analysis if such acts are to be stopped in the future. The book also pays insufficient attention to attacks on fishing and other small vessels within the region, concentrating on the incidents and responses involving larger commercial vessels.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I deals with Global Perspectives on International Maritime Crimes, while Part II covers Regional and National Perspectives on International Maritime Crime. It is worth noting that this book is not a comprehensive text on piracy, but rather a series of expert analysis and opinion from a particular geographical perspective. To the uninitiated reader, the chapters presuppose a basic knowledge of law, marine affairs, and a certain amount of Southeast Asian regional geography and politics. This is not a fault, as the editors and authors do not attempt to provide a full education on the subject, but presuppose that the reader will have some previous background concerning the general subject. However, a reader with little experience and minimal knowledge in the field of maritime piracy would do well to read a few introductory articles on international law, piracy, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and other international and regional organizations so as to have some fluency with the players, principles and jargon of contemporary maritime piracy.