Maritime piracy, past and present: politics, trade, popular culture and a face-to-face encounter

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Published in:
IIAS Newsletter

Citation for published version (APA):
Theme introduction

Piracy and robbery in the Asian seas

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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 misrepresentation of piracy. This is not to underestimate the difficulty of researching pirates. As 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 Velthoorn 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 piracy. Eric Pêixon 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 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


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 1st MARE Conference in Amsterdam in 2005, and ‘Maritime Security, Maritime Terrorism and Piracy in Asia’, co-organized by IIAS and ISEAS, in Singapore in 2006. Papers from these workshops will be published in edited volumes within the IIAS-ISEAS Series ‘Maritime Issues and Piracy in Asia’. The 2nd 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