

Maritime Piracy in Southeast Asia: Current Situation, Countermeasures, Achievements and Recurring Challenges

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Introduction

Despite serious national and regional efforts to counter maritime piracy in Southeast Asia, the threat continues to pose a clear and present danger to the maritime security of the region. In the past, Southeast Asia earned international notoriety as the piracy hotspot of the world, in some years accounting for more than half of the annual number of recorded piracy incidents globally. This trend reached a peak in 2000, when 242 out of 469 attacks reported globally occurred in Southeast Asia, according to the International Maritime Bureau (IMB).

By 2009, however, a remarkable change had occurred, with the IMB reporting that only 45 out of 416 worldwide piracy incidents had originated from Southeast Asia. It was during this period (2000-2009) that the global epicentre of world piracy attacks shifted from Southeast Asia to the Gulf of Aden. Sadly, though, the threat of piracy seems to have resurfaced once again in Southeast Asia, with a substantially higher number of incidents recorded in 2010. It is likely that because of the pirates' growing capabilities, the concentration of global shipping traffic in the area, the attractiveness of piracy as an alternative to pervasive poverty, and limitations of both capacity within and coordination among littoral states, piracy will remain one of the top maritime security threats in Southeast Asia for some time to come.

Current Situation

Next to the Gulf of Aden — particularly around Somalia —and the waters of West Africa near Nigeria, Southeast Asia remains one of the most pirate-infested areas of the world. Though Southeast Asia experienced a drop in piracy attacks between 2005 and 2009, the wider Asian region experienced a 60 percent rise in piracy in 2010, with a majority of attacks occurring in Southeast Asia. This upsurge has renewed maritime security anxieties, especially considering the region's longstanding image as a global maritime piracy hotspot. There is no doubt that Southeast Asia continues to be conducive to piracy attacks, due to a number of reasons.

First, the waters of Southeast Asia — particularly the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, the Sulo Sea and the Celebes Sea — are still one of the most favoured shipping

routes for international navigation. More than 50,000 ships pass through these waters annually, and the Malacca Strait in particular carries more than a quarter of the world's maritime trade a year.¹ These waters thus present an environment that is rich in potential targets for pirates and sea robbers.

Second, many communities around the littoral states of Southeast Asia continue to experience the kind of pervasive poverty that encourages people to resort to piracy as an alternative means of livelihood. This is especially the case in fishing communities, which have suffered from a continuous decline in catches due to overfishing, intense competition and illegal fishing practices. As fishing is the principal source of income in these communities, decreased catches have further exacerbated the inhabitants' already harsh economic conditions. Needless to say, this grim reality offers strong temptations for some people — who already possess the necessary maritime skills — to resort to piracy. In short, the continuing economic marginalization of maritime peoples in Southeast Asia has created a labour pool very conducive for piracy.²

Third, the geography of Southeast Asian coastal waters presents major challenges for regional governments, as well as a hospitable environment for pirates to operate. Countries in the region have a combined coastline of 92,451 km, representing 15.8 percent of the world's total. Protecting this huge coastline is a very expensive proposition, and the limited naval capacities of littoral states gives further confidence for pirates to operate. In addition to vast coastlines and limited capacities among regional states, efforts to pool efforts and resources among these states have suffered in recent years. Though regional maritime cooperation is constantly promoted among Southeast Asian countries in their efforts to protect the region's coastlines, overlapping maritime boundaries and existing territorial disputes among the littoral states are slowing down regional cooperative efforts. The sluggish pace of cooperation among states contrasts distinctly with the swift and decisive operations of the pirates. Issues related to national sovereignty and jurisdiction also affect the pace of regional anti-piracy measures in Southeast Asia.

Finally, piracy is still perceived to be socially acceptable in many of the coastal communities of Southeast Asia, and has been described as “an acceptable part of the local culture, a normal but illegal means of making money.”³ It is difficult to eradicate what is seen as an integral aspect of local culture, and an essential part of the local economy of coastal communities in the littoral states of Southeast Asia.

Countermeasures and Achievements

To address the piracy problem, Southeast Asian countries and extra-regional powers have entered into various regional countermeasures. For example, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia formed the MALSINDO patrols to fight piracy in the Malacca Strait. Other regional efforts — such as the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), the annual meeting of the Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies (HACGA), and even the Cooperative Mechanism for Maritime Safety and Environment Protection in the Malacca and Singapore Straits — have all contributed to the substantial drop in piracy attacks in Southeast Asia from 2005 to 2009. It is largely due to these regional cooperation measures that the epicentre of global maritime piracy threats has shifted away from Southeast Asia in recent years, demonstrating their effectiveness in preventing and deterring piracy operations.

Recurring Challenges

While some have feared that pirates in Southeast Asia are increasingly imitating the techniques and methods of Somali pirates, anti-piracy experts in the region challenge this view. Compared with Somali pirates, Southeast Asian pirates are less violent, less organized, and ill equipped to mount greater operational range.⁴ Moreover, Somali pirates operate from a failed state, while in Southeast Asia states are rapidly modernizing and strengthening the rule of law, in line with their own domestic characteristics.

That being said, challenges in regional cooperation have made the eradication of piracy in Southeast Asia substantially more difficult. One major roadblock to increased cooperation involves the perception by many regional states of regional cooperation measures as opportunities to enhance their national sovereignty — or as a risk to reduced sovereignty at the hands of other states. To this effect, slowdowns in regional cooperation can be expected when the process is perceived by states as threatening their national sovereignty.

A related challenge concerns the maritime boundary disputes that continue to apply in Southeast Asia. Overlapping maritime boundary claims are a constant irritation in inter-state relations among Southeast Asian nations, and this problem hinders effective regional cooperation measures against maritime piracy.

Conclusion

Through various regional maritime security arrangements, piracy threats in Southeast Asia subsided during the period 2005-2009. In 2010, however, piracy experienced a

resurgence in the region, largely because of the resilience of the pirates themselves and the persistence of underlying conditions that make piracy an integral part not only of the local culture, but also of the local economy.

It is likely that Southeast Asian piracy will continue to exact an increasing toll on the international shipping industry — increasing operational costs and insurance premiums — as well as on the security costs of littoral states, unless a number of steps are taken to enhance the anti-piracy campaign. Regional cooperation measures must be sustained and enhanced, while the capacity of individual nations to combat piracy must also be expanded and improved. Capacity-building efforts must address not only the naval forces and law enforcement agencies, but also the agencies of government that are tasked with addressing the underlying social and economic conditions that create a climate conducive to piracy.

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¹ This view has already been argued much earlier in Rommel C. Banlaoi, “Maritime Security Outlook for Southeast Asia” in *The Best of Times, the Worst of Times: Maritime Security in the Asia Pacific*, ed. Joshua Ho and Catharine Zara Raymond (Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies and World Scientific, 2005), 66.

² Adam J. Young, *Contemporary Maritime Piracy in Southeast Asia: History, Causes and Remedies* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 64.

³ Stuart W. Smead, “A Thesis on Modern Day Piracy,” accessed March 6, 2011, <http://www.angelfire.com/ga3/tropicalguy/piracy-modernday.html>.

⁴ Sam Bateman, “Piracy and Maritime Security in East Asia,” *East Asia Forum*, February 10, 2011, accessed February 28, 2011, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/02/10/piracy-and-maritime-security-in-east-asia-2/>.