The geopolitics of piracy? Gerard Graham Ong and Mark Valencia then discuss the possible nexus between piracy and terrorism, albeit from different perspectives, with Valencia questioning Ong's conflation of the two issues. A second chapter by Valencia describes regional and international efforts to combat piracy, and obstacles to their efficient implementation. In chapter six, Greg Chaklin tries to understand the past decades’ surge in piracy against the background of developments in maritime security and international maritime law, including the effects of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the extension of maritime sovereignty and jurisdiction by littoral states. Chaklin also discusses Japan’s role in fostering regional co-operation to combat piratical activity. Chapter seven by Indonesia’s former ambassador-at-large for maritime affairs, Hasjim Djalal, describes regional and international efforts taken to combat piracy, and is valuable as it reflects an early, to some extent even preparatory stage in the process of developing more substantial research on the issue. Today, research on contemporary Asian piracy has made significant headway, and we are already beginning to anticipate the answers to several of the questions posed by the editors in the conclusion of Piracy in Southeast Asia.

Lloyd’s of London has declared the Malacca Straits a high-risk area, a term usually reserved for war zones.

We now know a good deal about the criminology of piracy – who, where, how and why of the perpetrators. It is, by and large, a sadly familiar and not very romantic story of socially and economically disadvantaged young men making the most of criminal opportunities in fast-changing and socially unstable regions, such as Indonesia’s Riau Archipelago or the Southern Philippines, characterised by great disparities and weak law enforcement.

The possible nexus between piracy and terrorism has been widely studied and discussed in recent years by both academics and security officials, and is the subject of the second volume in the IAS/IIAS Series on Maritime Issues and Piracy, edited by Gerard Ong. The general consensus, however, seems to be that although the threat of a maritime terrorist attack – whether against cargo or passenger vessels or land-based targets using ships as floating bombs – should not be disregarded, it is not imminent and may have been exaggerated in the wake of 11 September 2001 and the October 2002 suicide attack on the French super tanker Limburg off Yemen.

What, then, about research on the ‘geopolitics of piracy’? Perhaps this is the area of most relevance today, not only for Southeast Asia but for the international maritime community as a whole. However, several questions identified by Johnson and Valencia regarding short-term responses, long-term strategies, and the role of different countries in combating piracy are rather narrowly policy-oriented, and lacking in the orietal sophistication, seem less satisfying from an academic perspective. Focusing on the ‘geo-politics of piracy’ also risks taking attention from other, more pressing concerns in maritime security and international relations. Largely thanks to the work of the IMB, and especially since the Piracy Reporting Centre was launched in 1994, piracy and the armed robbery of commercial vessels has been in the limelight – at international forums, among academics, and in the media. However, from the point of view of the two largest littoral states in Southeast Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines, piracy remains a minor maritime security issue – if a security issue at all – compared to problems such as unsettled maritime borders, illegal migration, smuggling, illegal fishing and environmental degradation.

Although neighbouring countries and interested parties such as the international shipping industry may recognise the legitimacy of Indonesian and Philippine concerns, their priorities reflect fundamentally different views of the high seas and of the rights and obligations of governments and maritime law enforcement authorities. Essentially, the conflict boils down to the 400-year-old discussion of Mare Liberum vs. Mare Clausum – the principle of freedom for all on the high seas vs. the right of governments to exercise jurisdiction over overlying oceans and exploit its natural resources. Political, social and economic developments since 1945 – including decolonization, the expansion of maritime sovereignty by coastal states, increasing competition over maritime resources, the growth of maritime traffic and the rise of non-traditional security threats including trafficking in goods and people and international terrorism – have made the controversy more pressing than ever since the turn of the 18th century.

Against this background, a comprehensive research agenda for the future should comprise not only the ‘geopolitics of piracy’ but the ‘geopolitics of maritime security’ as a whole. What are the main challenges to maritime security from the perspective of different actors and why are they seen as important? How do larger – national, regional as well as global – processes of economic, social and political change affect maritime security? Who are the main actors that strive to close or limit the freedom of the oceans and what are their motives? What are the advantages and risks of maintaining the principle of freedom of navigation on the seas? What effect will the different moves to close the seas have on global security, trade and the environment? To develop such a research agenda, involving both perspectives from Southeast Asia and the rest of the world, is the real challenge for the future.

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