

40 years of modern maritime piracy

Dr Risto Talas on the rise of violent local pirate attacks in South-east Asian waters

Scholars of Classical Greek have been studying maritime piracy since the Athenian general Thucydides began to chronicle acts of piracy between Athens and Sparta in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. That's about 2,440 years longer than I have been studying piracy, so the classicists appear to have stolen a bit of a march. However, the focus in this article is not on the last 2,440 years, only on the last 40.

But first, a little background. The so-called "Pirates of the Caribbean" golden age of piracy ran from the late 1600s to early 1720s.

The buccaneers operated from bases in the West Indies and attacked Spanish ships. Privateers like Sir Francis Drake also plundered Spanish galleons laden with gold returning from the New World to fill the coffers of Queen Elizabeth I. Other buccaneers, such as Captain Morgan (he of rum fame), were issued with "letters of the marque" by the Queen, which spared them from hanging from the yardarm if caught plundering French or Spanish ships.

However, once Spanish influence waned and the buccaneers turned their attention to the English, the Captain Sparrows of the age knew the game was up.

Pirates also operated in the Mediterranean on the Maghreb (Barbary) coast and the stereotype of the pirate with an eye patch is not a fiction: the one-eyed Arab pirate Rahman ibn Jabir al-Jalahimah is testimony to that.

To complete the geographical picture, the Iranun raiders, flying the raven flag, were a much-feared group of marauders plundering ships and islands on the spice route along the Malacca Straits and surrounding waters two centuries ago.

Fast-forward to the 1970s and we witness

the rise of violent local pirate attacks in South-east Asian waters from Malacca Strait to the South China Sea; West Africa; the Caribbean; and Central and Southern America.

Bearing the brunt of the South-east Asia attacks are Vietnamese refugees, yachts and fishing vessels.

In West Africa, many commercial vessels suffer pirate attacks, either from dugouts rowed alongside or from thieving stevedores operating under the approving gaze of local law enforcement officials.

The most violent attacks occur in the Caribbean and Central America, where drug smugglers would take over private yachts, murder the crew and use the yachts to run drugs into the southern states of the US.

Throughout the 1980s, pirate attacks against commercial shipping continued unabated where the vessels were alongside or moored in the roads, but attacks on shipping underway was still something of a rarity. In 1989 there were fewer than two dozen attacks on shipping transiting the Malacca Straits.

However, the world was about to witness the greatest recent shift in "mare-politics": the demise of the Soviet Union in early 1992.

The once mighty Black Sea and Far Eastern military fleets returned to port, bankrupt and rusting, which meant that NATO and its allies no longer had to play cat and mouse with the surface fleets to the same extent. The sudden disappearance of so much floating military tonnage resulted in power vacuums in the key waterway chokepoints and resulted in an explosive growth in piracy, especially around the Malacca Strait.

My first recollection of a piracy attack in Somali waters was in 1995, when I read a

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