Epilogue: Piracy and the End of Empire

For around half a century, from around 1900 until the end of the colonial era in the mid twentieth century, there was relatively little piratical activity in Southeast Asia. As the colonial states took control over the coasts, islands and estuaries where the pirates used to have their bases, piracy and maritime raiding ceased, for the most part, to be a viable way to gain material wealth, social status or political power. Piracy did continue in Chinese waters throughout the first half of the twentieth century, until more socially and politically stable conditions developed after the People's Republic of China was established in 1949. Apart from a few spectacular attacks carried out by passengers on ferries in the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca, however, the activities of twentieth-century Chinese pirates rarely affected Southeast Asia.[1]

By contrast, in the wake of World War II and after most former colonies in Southeast Asia gained independence, several outbreaks of piracy have occurred in various parts of the region, including in the Strait of Malacca in 1945–46, in the southern Philippines and north Borneo in the 1950s and first half of the 1960s (and later), in the Gulf of Thailand in the 1970s and 1980s, in the South China Sea in the 1990s, and again in the Strait of Malacca in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. As a result, particularly of the successive waves of piracy and armed robbery against ships in the Strait of Malacca, Southeast Asia has gained a reputation for being one of the most pirate-infested regions in the contemporary world.

It might be tempting – particularly for apologists of colonialism – to explain the resurgence in piracy in the region after independence as a result of the demise of colonial power and law and order. A message from the British Legation in Manila to London in 1950, for example, claimed that after the Americans had left the Philippines, and with the Philippine authorities not being capable of maintaining the same standard of law and order, the Moros were 'reverting to type', again 'finding in piracy and smuggling an easy way of

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[1] See Miller, *Pirates of the Far East*, 153−84, for piracy in the South China Sea in the twentieth century.

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making a living'.[2] Such analyses echo nineteenth-century views of the Malays and other maritime groups in Southeast Asia as natural and inveterate pirates, who could be expected to take every opportunity to resume their piratical habits as soon as imperial law enforcement and vigilance were relaxed.

However, although anthropological evidence from Jolo to some extent supports the notion of a cultural continuity and a sanctioning of maritime raiding among the Tausug, the explanations as to the renewed piratical activity in Southeast Asia after independence – as elsewhere in the postcolonial world – are not so much linked to cultural endurance or continuity with the precolonial era as to more recent changes in the global economy, technology and the international shipping industry.[3] For example, the reduction in the number of crew members aboard commercial vessels, combined with the increase in maritime trade and lax security onboard ships, have all served to create new opportunities for piracy in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Another, often overseen, explanation is the motorisation of water transportation in the twentieth century, particularly the availability of inexpensive but powerful outboard engines suitable for use in piratical attacks.

These explanations may not be directly linked to the end of imperialism in Southeast Asia in the decades following the end of World War II, but in at least three other respects colonialism and its legacies are at the heart of the explanations for the resurgence of piracy in the region. The first of these is war and its aftermath, particularly with regard to World War II and the Vietnam War. Petty piracy affecting the local junk trade increased in the Strait of Malacca during the Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945, and in the southern Philippines the proliferation of arms and military surplus engines after the end of World War II encouraged maritime raiding and led to a surge in piracy. The end of the Vietnam War in 1975, meanwhile, led to another – and more serious – outbreak of piratical activity that targeted the refugees who fled by boat across the Gulf of Thailand from southern Vietnam and Cambodia to Thailand and Malaysia.[4] In all of these instances, piratical activity increased as a result of the decline in law and order due to major wars.

The second explanation concerns the national borders in maritime Southeast Asia, all of which are legacies of colonialism. Smuggling cigarettes over the maritime border between British North Borneo and the southern Philippines, for example, stimulated piracy and maritime raiding after the Philippines gained independence in 1946. Subsequently, after North Borneo became a

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[2] British Legation, Manila to the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, 24 March 1950, FO 371/84337 (TNA).

[3] Kiefer, *Tausug*, 85; see further Liss, *Oceans of Crime*; Eklöf Amirell, *Pirates in Paradise*, for these and other more recent explanations of piracy in Southeast Asia.

[4] Ibid., 17–34.

part of Malaysia in 1963, mutual suspicion and hostility between Malaysia and the Philippines due to the territorial dispute over Sabah, the eastern part of Malaysian Borneo, effectively hampered collaboration between the two countries to suppress piracy and maritime raiding. As a consequence, pirates based in the Sulu Archipelago could conduct raids with relative impunity, targeting Indonesian and Malaysian victims at sea as well as towns and settlements on the east coast of Sabah. Such piratical activity emanating from the Sulu Archipelago has continued more or less unabated until the present, many of the perpetrators being members of or associated with militant Islamist or sessecionist groups based in the southern Philippines.[5]

The maritime border established by the British and Dutch through the Strait of Malacca is also part of the explanation for piracy in that part of the region. Shortly after independence, in the 1950s, Indonesian regular and irregular troops began to undertake frequent piratical attacks on fishing boats from British Malaya. Some of the attacks appear to have involved the killing of the victims, but more often they consisted of thefts of nets, engines, stores and money or, more rarely, the confiscation of boats and arrests of men.[6] Officially sponsored piracy was also used at the beginning of the 1960s by Indonesia in the context of her policy of Confrontation (*Konfrontasi*) against Malaysia, which the Indonesian government saw as a neocolonial construction. In 1963 Malaysia's Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, directly accused the Indonesian Navy of robbing Malaysian fishermen of their catch and equipment, setting their boats on fire and physically assaulting them, both in Malaysian and international waters.[7]

More recently, since the beginning of the 1980s, piracy in the Strait of Malacca has surged on several occasions, in part because of the lack of naval cooperation and intelligence-sharing between the three littoral states in the Strait, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. By contrast, when efforts have been made to conduct coordinated antipiracy operations and share information between the law-enforcement authorities of the three countries, piracy has generally been brought under control without much difficulty, for example in 1992 and 2005.[8]

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[5] Eklöf Amirell, 'Suppressing Piracy in Asia'; Liss, 'Contemporary Piracy'. In 2017 the International Maritime Bureau reported that kidnappings by Philippine militants in the Sulu Sea and the Celebes Sea had stopped due to the efforts of the Philippine military, although it remains to be seen whether the improved maritime security situation can be maintained in the long run; ICC International Maritime Bureau, 'Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships', 21–2.

[6] C-in-C Far Eastern Station to Admiralty, 20 November 1953, AIR 2/12136 (TNA).

[7] Abdul Rahman, Address to the Malaysian Parliament, 12 November 1963, in Winks and Bastin (eds.), *Malaysia*, 436.

[8] Eklöf Amirell, *Pirates in Paradise*, 133–42.

Lastly, the differences in priority between the colonial and postcolonial states go some way to explain why piracy has occasionally surged in Southeast Asia after independence. Whereas a key priority of the colonial states was law and order and the promotion of economic development, mainly for the benefit of foreign traders and investors largely based in the metropoles, the postcolonial states in Southeast Asia have often been more concerned with nation-building and with trying to improve the economic and social conditions of the indigenous population. These priorities have frequently led to nationalistic economic policies and efforts to control and exploit natural resources, both on land and at sea. In terms of maritime policies, this shift has meant that the protection of international maritime commerce from petty piracy has often been of less importance than the assertion of maritime sovereignty and control over maritime resources. Such considerations have been particularly important for Indonesia, the largest maritime state in Southeast Asia, but also for the Philippines and, to a lesser degree, Malaysia. Against that background, the main reason the Indonesian authorities at times since the 1980s have allowed piracy to flourish is not the country's lack of sea power, but its maritime priorities. Controlling the Indonesian Archipelago against illegal fishing and smuggling has, for example, frequently been seen as more important than the suppression of piracy.[9]

Despite much talk about Southeast Asia being one of the most piracy-prone regions of the world over the past few decades, there has actually been relatively little piratical activity in the region – at least in historical comparison – and the waves of piracy that have occurred have, for the most part, been relatively limited and of low intensity, with the exception of the gruesome attacks on the boat refugees from southern Vietnam and Cambodia in the Gulf of Thailand in the 1970s and 1980s. The postcolonial states have also, on several occasions, shown that they are able to suppress piracy and armed robbery against ships and to uphold maritime security. The necessary conditions for doing so have been peace, and international cooperation built on mutual trust and political will. In these respects, the conditions for maintaining maritime security in postcolonial Southeast Asia differ little from those of the colonial period.

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[9] Ibid., 162–3; on the fishing policies of Indonesia and other Southeast Asian states, see Butcher, *Closing of the Frontier*.