

CONTEMPORARY MARITIME PIRACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

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1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the frequency of maritime piracy trending steadily downwards globally, the waters of Southeast Asia have seen a consistent increase in the number of incidents over the past four years. A 35% jump in attacks was recorded between Q1 2024 and Q1 2025

alone.¹ Piracy has always been an endemic phenomenon in the region and was often intertwined with political power struggles and used as a tool by rulers to maintain their political control, but a steady increase in the number of pirate attacks has the potential to challenge trade stability and subsequently regional security.

¹ ICC International Maritime Bureau, *Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships Report: January–March 2025* (2025): 7.

Australia is almost entirely dependent upon maritime trade, a significant portion of which travels through the piracy-prone waters of the Indonesian archipelago. This includes much of the nation's imported refined fuels from refineries in Singapore and Malaysia. Additionally, exports of bulk commodities such as iron ore and natural gas pass through areas such as the Sunda Strait bound for lucrative North Asian markets in China, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. Australia has a direct strategic interest in the waters north of our shoreline; any disruptions to trade or political stability in the region would have damaging consequences. This report seeks to analyse the current situation in the region, track the progress of regional anti-piracy measures over the last three decades, outline any risks that maritime piracy poses to Australian strategic interests, and describe what can be done to further anti-piracy efforts in Southeast Asia.

2. DEFINING PIRACY

Article 101 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) defines piracy as 'any illegal acts of violence or detention...committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private

ship or a private aircraft,' with the important distinction that such acts must occur 'on the high seas.'² Given that most attacks in Southeast Asia occur in the territorial waters of the region's littoral states, this definition precludes such attacks from being described as piracy, rather being described with the term 'armed robbery at sea'.³

Alternatively, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) uses a broader definition, referring to piracy as 'the act of boarding any vessel with an intent to commit theft or any other crime, and with an intent or capacity to use force in furtherance of that act.'⁴ Similarly, the International Maritime Organization's Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation adopts a definition which includes acts committed in territorial waters.⁵ For ease of understanding, the IMB will be used throughout this report. References to piracy will be inclusive both of piracy on

² United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, opened for signature December 10, 1982, 1833 U.N.T.S. 397, art. 101.

³ Carolin Liss, *Oceans of Crime: Maritime Piracy and Transnational Security in Southeast Asia and Bangladesh* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010): 65.

⁴ Edward N. Eadie, "Definitions of piracy, particularly that of the International Maritime Bureau," *Maritime Studies* 119, no. 1 (2001): 10.

⁵ International Maritime Organization, *Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation*, adopted March 10, 1988, entered into force March 1, 1992, 1678 U.N.T.S. 221.

the high seas and armed robbery in territorial waters.

3. AUSTRALIAN TRADE IN THE REGION

Australia is heavily dependent upon trade that travels through the sea lanes to the nation's north. 99% of Australian imports and exports by volume are carried by sea; roughly two-thirds of exports and 40% of imports travel through the waters of the Indonesian archipelago. The Malacca and Singapore Straits are two of the busiest maritime trade routes in the world, facilitating roughly 30% of global trade and serving as a vital conduit for Australian trade with Europe and the Middle East. Additionally, the narrow Sunda, Lombok and Makassar Straits carry a large proportion of Australian bulk exports through to North Asia. In 2020-21, the value of Australia's maritime exports totalled \$354.8 billion, and imports \$246.6 billion.⁶ Singapore itself is a crucial transshipment hub for Australian trade, acting as a redistribution point where cargo is transferred from larger international vessels to smaller ships bound for Australian ports. The shipping

networks of the region are closely interconnected, and disruptions around key hubs such as Singapore can have wide-reaching impacts on trade flows. The significance of ensuring the stability and security of maritime trade in the region cannot be overstated and as such must remain a constant focus of the Australian government.

Australia has multiple vulnerabilities in its trade and supply routes. The unavoidable geographic dependency on sea lanes that travel through key chokepoints such as the Lombok, Sunda and Malacca Straits leaves Australian trade vulnerable to blockades at bottle necks or supply disruption in times of regional instability or conflict. The 2023 Defence Strategic Review highlighted the fact that, despite Australia facing little to no possibility of any power even contemplating a military invasion, "more countries are able to project combat power across greater ranges, including against our trade and supply routes which are vital for Australia's economic prosperity."⁷ In the low-inventory, just-in-time globalised world, any disruption to one or more of these key trade routes could have immediate consequences for

⁶ Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, *Australian Sea Freight 2020–21* (2023): 7.

⁷ Australian Government, *Defence Strategic Review 2023* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2023): 25.

the Australian economy. A prolonged interruption, whether due to conflict, coercion, or grey-zone activities, could delay or halt the flow of critical commodities ranging from fuel to life-saving pharmaceuticals.⁸

Fuel security is also an ongoing concern for Australia. The latest annual Australian Petroleum Statistics published by the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water state that Australia currently only holds 23 and 28 days' worth of reserve diesel and petrol consumption respectively.⁹ In a 2019 mock scenario released by the Australian Government under a freedom of information request, the nation saw imports fall to just 35% following disruptions to the shipping of refined fuels to and from the Asian refineries that Australia is heavily reliant upon.¹⁰ Such a disruption to supply could lead to a series

of cascading crises in which vital supplies such as pharmaceuticals, food, and water are unable to be transported around the nation and would hamper the operational ability of the ADF as a whole. The 2020 Liquid Fuel Security Review recommended that the Australian Government ensures the nation can handle major disruptions to supply by increasing domestic fuel stocks and refining capacity.¹¹ Despite these recommendations, Australia in 2025 finds itself with only two operational fuel refineries, down from seven in 2010.¹² The lack of domestic fuel storage and refining capacity leaves Australia more vulnerable than it needs to be to interruptions to global oil supply and trade.

Australia's reliance upon trade routes through the waters to its north is a strategic vulnerability that cannot be easily avoided. As an island nation, Australia is always going to be reliant upon maritime trade, and the geographic location of the continent means that sea

⁸ David Uren, *The Trade Routes Vital to Australia's Economic Security* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2024): 17.

⁹ Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, *Australian Petroleum Statistics—Data Extract December 2024* (2024).

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjojY2RjYjUzYTMTtMjBkZS00OGI1LWEyMWYtN2M3OGNmMzAzMTBjliwidCI6IjA3MDk5MWRkLWNkYjctNDc2Zi04MGRjLWU4YzNhOTFjNzBhZiJ9>

¹⁰ Malcolm Sutton, "Australia's Fuel Security Falling Short as 'War-Game' Report, Released under FOI, Reveals Vulnerabilities," *ABC News*, January 6, 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-01-07/australia-fuel-security-falling-short-foi-war-game-report/104745210>.

¹¹ Australian Government, *Liquid Fuel Security Review – Interim Report* (Canberra: Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water, 2019): 1.

¹² Hunter Laidlaw, "Oil Refineries and Fuel Security," *FlagPost* (Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia), December 17, 2020, https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/FlagPost/2020/December/Oil_refineries_and_fuel_security.

lanes through disruption-prone waters will tend to be the most economical and efficient choice. As such, all potential disruptive consequences must be considered, one being the perennially relevant issue of maritime piracy.

4. CONTEMPORARY MARITIME PIRACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Piracy is far from a new phenomenon in Southeast Asia, having undergone significant evolution since the era of sultanates and chiefdoms. In the past, piracy was often employed as a state-sponsored - or at least “state-tolerated” means of enforcing regional power.¹³ As early as the 16th century, ‘Orang Laut’ pirate crews operated as independent raiders in the Malacca Strait but were loyal to King of Malacca when required, serving as rowers in the ruler’s fleet in exchange for food and an uncontested coexistence.¹⁴ In the modern day, piracy is almost entirely conducted as a criminal enterprise.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a surge in piracy in the region. Widening socioeconomic gaps and economic crises

drove people to seek alternative sources of income whilst simultaneously impacting the ability of states to maintain law and order.¹⁵ The 1997 Asian financial crisis in particular left many states with reduced budgets for military and naval operations, limiting their ability to conduct effective anti-piracy patrols. Facing upwards of 200 incidents per year, the littoral states of the region gradually took steps to enhance regional anti-piracy measures in the face of a rapidly worsening situation. In 1992, the International Maritime Bureau’s Piracy Reporting Centre (IMB PRC) was established in Kuala Lumpur with the goal of raising awareness of maritime piracy and providing a service for operators to report incidents. This was an effective first step in promoting a co-ordinated response to the issue, although the centre has faced claims of being limited by its reliance on voluntary reporting.

Further regional collaboration would soon follow, such as the Malacca Straits Patrol. A multilateral effort established in 2004 by Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, the Malacca Straits Patrol coordinates naval patrols and information sharing to tackle piracy in the Straits of

¹³ Carolin Liss, “Maritime Piracy in Southeast Asia,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2003): 57.

¹⁴ Timothy P. Barnard, “Celates, Rayat-Laut, Pirates: The Orang Laut and Their Decline in History,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 80, no. 2 (2007): 34.

¹⁵ Samuel Pyeatt Meneff, *Trends in Maritime Violence: A Special Report from Jane’s Intelligence Review and Jane’s Sentinel* (Coulsdon, UK: Jane’s Information Group, 1997): 4.

Malacca and Singapore. Thailand joined as an observer in 2005, becoming a full member in 2008. The establishment of the Regional Co-operation Agreement in Combating Piracy against Ships in Asia Information Sharing Centre (ReCAAP ISC) in 2006 would later provide the first government-to-government agreement aimed at combating piracy in the region. ReCAAP ISC provides detailed incident reporting and information sharing capacity to the 21 states signed on as contracting parties and remains a vital player in regional cooperation and information sharing to this day.

In the present day, maritime piracy in the region is once again on the rise. Whilst regional co-operation initially curbed the frequency of attacks, annual reports from ReCAAP show that these initial gains have not been fully sustained, and recent data points to a resurgence in pirate activity. 2019 saw 72 incidents in the region, with this number steadily climbing to 107 in 2024.¹⁶ In the first five months of 2025, 79 incidents were recorded. Not only has the number of piracy incidents increased, so has their severity. Recent piracy incidents have

included larger scale, organised hijacking operations. ReCAAP organise their reporting of incidents into four categories, with Category 4 being the lowest severity and Category 1 the highest (requiring a “large number of perpetrators...armed with guns and knives” and the vessel being hijacked with its cargo stolen).¹⁷ 2024 saw the first two Category 1 incidents in four years, revealing that piracy in the region continues to pose a more complex threat than simple, opportunistic theft. A spike in organised, planned attacks highlights the need for sustained vigilance amongst regional authorities.¹⁸

5. TWO SIMILAR INCIDENTS, ONE DECADE APART

Analysis of two Category 1 incidents in 2024 offers valuable insight into the evolution of regional maritime security and the gaps in capability that still exist. One of these two incidents the hijacking of vessels *Royal TB 17* and *OB Royal 17* - shares marked similarities with an incident that occurred a decade earlier, the hijacking of *Orapin 4* in 2014. Both

¹⁶ ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, *Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia: Annual Report 2024* (2024): 7.

¹⁷ ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, “Classification of Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships Incidents,” accessed May 12, 2025, https://www.recaap.org/classification_of_incidents

¹⁸ ReCAAP ISC, *Annual Report 2024*: 12.

incidents involved well-coordinated groups of armed perpetrators who successfully seized control of tankers and siphoned liquid cargo to a waiting vessel. Both cases are also examples of highly organised, carefully planned hijacking operations. However, unlike in 2014, when the pirates managed to elude local authorities the 2024 incident resulted in the successful apprehension of the perpetrators. The contrast between the two cases demonstrates the crucial role that well-resourced local coast guard and police forces can play in effectively bringing pirates to justice.

6. TANKER ORAPIN 4

On the 27 May 2014, the Thailand-registered tanker *Orapin 4* departed Singapore bound for Pontianak on the island of Borneo carrying a cargo of automotive diesel fuel. Approximately 12 hours later, while sailing 19 nautical miles from the Indonesian shoreline, the tanker was boarded by a group of 10 pirates armed with guns and knives. The pirates subdued the 14-man crew of the tanker, destroyed communications equipment, and painted over the ship's name in an effort to avoid recognition. The pirates successfully cut off all communications

between the *Orapin 4* and its shipping company, took control of the vessel, and were able to siphon 3700 tonnes of fuel from the tanker to another pirate-controlled vessel which was positioned alongside. The tanker was left with only enough fuel to sail back to Thailand. The pirates were never identified, and the cargo was never recovered.¹⁹

The incident attracted significant attention from local and international media, including Australia's ABC and Thailand's *Bangkok Post* who used the incident to call for increased counter-piracy measures in the region.²⁰ More significantly, it illustrated the scale on which pirates in the region could operate; organised groups were stealing cargo worth millions and escaping undetected. Thai police and shipping company lawyers cleared the captain and crew of any insider involvement despite speculation to the contrary.²¹

7. ROYAL TB 17 AND OB ROYAL 17

¹⁹ OCEANUS Live, "The hijacking of Tanker, Orapin 4," accessed May 2, 2025, <https://www.oceanuslive.org/main/viewnews.aspx?uid=00000884>

²⁰ Amornrat Mahitthirook, "Hijacking Sparks Call for Armed Ships," *Bangkok Post*, June 9, 2014, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/414276/hijacking-sparks-call-for-armed-ships>

²¹ Adam McCauley, "Pirates in Southeast Asia: The World's Most Dangerous Waters," *TIME*, August 15, 2014, <https://time.com/piracy-southeast-asia-malacca-strait/>

On 22 September 2024, *Royal TB 17* and its accompanying barge *OB Royal 17* were 47 nautical miles south of Borneo, transporting a cargo of fatty acid methyl ester biofuel – a form of refined biodiesel often used in the maritime industry. Five attackers approached on a small boat, first boarding the barge and then the tug boat. The crews of both vessels were threatened and restrained. Once again, the fuel cargo was siphoned to a different tanker. Additionally, cash and personal belongings were stolen, and onboard navigational and communications equipment was damaged. The hijackers escaped with the cargo, but on 1 November 2024 ReCAAP reported that 14 suspected perpetrators had been arrested following a series of investigations by the Central Kalimantan Police.²²

8. COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE INCIDENTS

Both cases reflect the organisational complexity with which pirates in the region often operate. These incidents go far beyond petty theft – they require the

coordination of multiple vessels and large numbers of pirates attacking and departing with precise timing. The sheer volume of cargo stolen also provides a concrete example of the ability of maritime piracy to significantly impact trade in the region.

The arrest of the hijackers of *Royal TB 17* and *OB Royal 17* demonstrates improved local coordination and enforcement capacity. Central Kalimantan Police used information gathered from the hijacked crew to arrest a number of initial suspects, one of whom was a member of the hijacked tug's crew. Investigations are ongoing into the sale of the stolen cargo, but the successful police investigation illustrates that pirate groups can be swiftly brought to justice when sufficient information is available to local authorities. Despite this, the fact that the attack occurred suggests that deterrence is still weak.²³ From an Australian perspective, this reinforces the importance of providing support to Southeast Asian maritime agencies where possible. Financial and capacity-building support can strengthen the efficiency of information-sharing, in turn increasing the

²² ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, "List of Incidents for 2024," accessed May 8, 2025: 12. <https://www.recaap.org/resources/ck/files/Number%20of%20Incidents/2024/List%20of%20Incidents%20for%202024.pdf>

²³ Thu Nguyen Hoang Anh, "Stemming the Tide of Piracy in Southeast Asia," *The Interpreter*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/stemming-tide-piracy-southeast-asia>.

speed and effectiveness of local responses in the wake of piracy incidents. Whilst sharing various similarities with the *Orapin 4* incident of 2014, the hijacking of *Royal TB 17* and *OB Royal 17* and the subsequent police investigation reveal the meaningful action that can be taken to tackle piracy in the region when authorities have sufficient resources at their disposal.

9. THE PROGRESS MADE, AND THE GAPS THAT STILL EXIST

The establishment of initiatives such as the Malacca Straits Patrol and ReCAAP ISC saw an initial decline in the severity and frequency of piracy in the region. From a high of over 200 yearly incidents in the late 1990s, the frequency of events fell to a low of 47 in 2009, only 5 years after the establishment of the Patrol and 3 years after that of ReCAAP. Other initiatives include the Eyes in the Sky arrangement, an element of the MSP focused on aerial patrols of the region to enhance maritime realm awareness.²⁴ Perhaps most significantly, these patrols marked the first time that regional collaboration had seen the littoral states

of the region partially overlook concerns of sovereignty as these patrols enabled limited movement of the other member states' military aircraft and naval vessels over regional maritime borders.²⁵ As outlined in ReCAAP's mission statement, "no single nation or agency has the capacity and capability to deal with the entire spectrum of maritime security threats."²⁶ The efforts that have been made by states in Southeast Asia to tackle maritime piracy prove that regional collaboration on the matter is both possible and increasingly recognised as essential. Sustained cooperation, information sharing, and capacity-building have proven to reduce the frequency and severity of incidents. Unfortunately, the recent jump in incidents demonstrates that these initiatives must be reinforced and supplemented.

While regional cooperation has led to significant reductions in piracy incidents in the long term, the number of recent pirate attacks is one of several concerning trends. Firstly, the *Orapin 4* incident in 2014 was part of a spate of organised, sophisticated hijacking operations. Oil-siphoning attacks in

²⁴ Giulia Bellabarba, "The Coastal States Tackling Piracy in the Malacca Strait," *Security Outlines*, February 1, 2024, <https://www.securityoutlines.cz/the-coastal-states-tackling-piracy-in-the-malacca-strait/>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, "About ReCAAP ISC," accessed May 8, 2025, https://www.recaap.org/about_ReCAAP-ISC.

particular rose dramatically in number in the early to mid-2010s, highlighting the fact that even in the face of expanded regional co-operation, organised piracy could still evade the efforts of local authorities to maintain law and order in the region. 10 years on, the frequency of oil-siphoning attacks is not at the critical level it was at the time of the *Orapin 4* incident, but the fact that similar attacks continue to occur - as recently as September 2024 - indicates on-going, underlying issues.

There are also shortcomings with the regional co-operation mechanisms themselves. Indonesia and Malaysia have not joined ReCAAP as Contracting Parties. The hijacking of *Royal TB 17* and *OB Royal 17* occurred in Indonesian territorial waters through which the majority of trade in the region passes. Indonesia's continued involvement in counter-piracy efforts will therefore always be crucial to the security of the region as a whole. It has been speculated that the Indonesian government wanted ReCAAP to be established in Jakarta rather than Singapore, and that it was this that led to Indonesia's refusal to participate in ReCAAP.²⁷ Additionally, concerns

regarding the integrity and sovereignty of Indonesian territorial waters have been raised; agreements such as the EiS initiative and its bypass of maritime borders may appear undesirable to a nation that considers itself strictly neutral and firmly sovereign. Historically, Indonesia does not support foreign coast guard or military vessels transiting through Indonesian waters, as such actions "disrespect Indonesian autonomy and independence."²⁸ Malaysia also turned down becoming a contracting party of ReCAAP. It has been argued that they did not want ReCAAP to compete with the Kuala Lumpur-based IMB despite both organisations being central to counter-piracy efforts in the region.

Maritime security analyst Karsten von Hoesslin raised the concern that Indonesia and Malaysia are reluctant to share information with the Singaporean organisation because they believe the nation is an 'intelligence hoarder,' and may be unwilling to share information.²⁹ Regardless of the validity of these beliefs, the fact that the speculation exists is indicative of the on-going mistrust between major nations in the region.

²⁷ McCauley, "Pirates in Southeast Asia"

²⁸ Kornwika Poonnaawatt, "Multilateral cooperation against maritime piracy in the Straits of Malacca: From the RMSI to ReCAAP," *Marine Policy* 152 (2023): 2.

²⁹ McCauley, "Pirates in Southeast Asia"

Issues of co-ordination also exist domestically in Southeast Asian nations. Indonesia has 13 different agencies responsible for maritime security.³⁰ Despite positive progress being made by the Indonesian Coast Guard (Bakamla) in counter-piracy patrolling and deterrence, such complex internal bureaucracy results in overlapping responsibilities and hinders effective cooperation across agencies.³¹ Without intelligence coordination at the domestic level, the challenge of multinational co-operation becomes more difficult. It also must be noted that Indonesian government faces a variety of other maritime issues. Problems such as illegal fishing pose significant economic challenges, potentially spreading local resources thinly. The general aspiration to improve maritime security governance remains nonetheless universal in Indonesia as the government seeks to consolidate and organise its various resources and institutions into a coherent, targeted force. Successful achievement of this integration goal remains a challenge.³²

³⁰ Sean A. G. Andrews, *Naval Constabulary Operations and Fisheries Governance: An Integrated Approach for the Australian Maritime Domain* (London: Routledge, 2024): 188.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

³² Arue Afriansyah et al., "Nurturing Hero or Villain: BAKAMLA as the Indonesian Coast Guard," *Politics and Governance* 2024, no. 12 (2024): 10.

10. PIRACY AND AUSTRALIAN INTERESTS

Maritime piracy in the Southeast Asian region threatens Australia's strategic interests. There are direct and indirect threats to Australian trade. Piracy can and might directly impact vessels carrying Australian imports or exports, but the main threat posed stems from the destabilising influence of pirate activity upon regional trade security.

Direct intersection between maritime piracy and Australian shipping—for example, the hijacking of a tanker bound for Australian waters – is unlikely, but not impossible. A hypothetical scenario in which such a tanker was hijacked would have minimal impact on trade. More than 1000 tankers supply Australia yearly; the direct loss of one vessel's product would be negligible. The volume of shipping transiting Southeast Asian waters also means that despite the higher incidence of attacks, the probability of attack on any one ship is relatively low. Even before the establishment of most multilateral regional initiatives in 2003, the risk of any one transiting ship being attacked in the Malacca Strait was less than 0.001%.³³

³³ David Rosenberg, "The Political Economy of Piracy in the South China Sea," *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 47.

The direct impact of piracy will have to be considered more carefully if Australia pursues the creation of a merchant fleet as the Albanese government has committed to given the increased number of Australian-owned and operated vessels that would operate in the region. The direct threat posed by maritime piracy to Australian trade is low but also persistent and with the potential to escalate.

Indirect impacts pose the more significant threat to Australian strategic interests than do direct actions. An increase in pirate activity in any of the chokepoints through which Australian trade moves would see insurance premiums and security costs rise, delays in the import and export of goods, and potential rerouting of cargo. In 2009, it was estimated that piracy in the region was costing the world economy US\$25 billion yearly. The spike in piracy in the mid-2010s saw shipping insurance premiums increase dramatically.³⁴ Whilst these figures reflect past crises, the current surge in attacks could see similar, if not worse outcomes if it were to continue. Given Australia's reliance on regional transshipment hubs and the interconnected nature of regional

maritime logistics, any sustained insecurity in the region threatens long-term trade stability. Australia's lack of fuel reserves leaves the nation vulnerable to any significant delays or disruptions to shipping routes, and the nation's near-total reliance on maritime trade as a whole means that the effects will be felt throughout the entire Australian economy. Such risks reinforce the necessity of Australia deepening its engagement in regional maritime security initiatives.

11. OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

In March 2024, leaders of the 11 ASEAN nations met with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in Melbourne for the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit. The Summit produced a joint declaration expressing a shared commitment to strengthening cooperation on transnational crime, broadening practical defence collaboration, and continuing joint efforts to uphold peace and stability in the region.”³⁵ These statements echoed Australia's 2024 National Defence Strategy, which likewise called for enhanced co-operation in regional security matters, policy engagement, and

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Government of Australia, *Melbourne Declaration – A Partnership for the Future*, March 6, 2024: 8.

information sharing initiatives.³⁶ Australia seeks to expand its defence and security co-operation with ASEAN nations, and the issue of contemporary maritime piracy offers an opportunity to strengthen regional ties in the face of an escalating regional issue. Southeast Asia is a region of great strategic importance for Australia, and maintenance of the rules-based order in the region is an ongoing priority.

“If there is any bottom line in the fight against piracy, it is always resources.”³⁷ These were the words of ReCAAP director Nicholas Teo in the wake of the *Orapin 4* incident – and serve as an example of how Australia can help tackle the issue over a decade later. Australia is a well-resourced nation with ambitions to expand spending on regional co-operation. This spending could assist bodies such as ReCAAP, to whom Australia already provides financial support (\$100,000 AUD in 2024). The expansion and support of information-sharing initiatives is both vital to counter-piracy efforts and a more realistic goal than direct force deployment. Australia already operates initiatives such as the Pacific Maritime Security Program, delivering enhanced training,

coordination, and assets such as patrol boats to 16 Pacific Island nations.³⁸ A similar program could be launched in Southeast Asia, assisting the nations of the region to expand local coast guard capabilities and other maritime enforcement operations. Exercises and wargaming in counter-piracy operations can be initiated and expanded – this would once again align with the National Defence Strategy commitment of “maturing defence training and exercises” with regional partners.³⁹ If ASEAN nations seek direct defence collaboration, joint naval exercises and patrols are within Australia’s capabilities. Pre-existing multilateral initiatives like the Malacca Strait Patrol serve as a local example on which further Australian engagement can be modelled. Domestically, ambitions to procure a strategic merchant fleet are ongoing and will serve to strengthen the resilience of Australian trade. The issue of fuel reserves must be tackled despite maritime piracy posing little direct threat – the potential for regional trade destabilisation poses too great a strategic risk. Australia is incredibly well placed to

³⁶ Australian Government, *National Defence Strategy 2024* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2024): 48.

³⁷ McCauley, “Pirates in Southeast Asia”

³⁸ Australian Government Department of Defence, “Pacific Maritime Security Program,” accessed 22 June, 2025, <https://www.defence.gov.au/defence-activities/programs-initiatives/pacific-engagement/maritime-capability>

³⁹ Australian Government, *National Defence Strategy 2024*, 48.

capitalise on its existing ties with the region to enhance and expand counter-piracy co-operation. Policymakers and the government as a whole must take the initiative in the face of an unpredictable and evolving threat, but one that provides an opportunity for strengthened regional security collaboration.

12. CONCLUSION

Maritime piracy remains an endemic problem in Southeast Asia. Piracy in the region poses immediate threats to maritime freight alongside far-reaching indirect threats to global trade and regional stability. Australia finds itself particularly vulnerable to regional trade disruptions, facing a combination of unavoidable geographic factors and underprepared local infrastructure.

Since the early 2000s, multilateral efforts to combat piracy have strengthened regional counter-piracy capabilities through coordinated deployments of maritime force and the consolidation of information sharing efforts. However, an ongoing spike in regional pirate activity highlights the necessity of further action. Piracy is increasing in both frequency and severity, as local authorities struggle to tackle the

issue in the face of a multifaceted maritime security environment. Successful counter-piracy operations, such as in the wake of the hijacking of *Royal TB 17* and *OB Royal 17*, illustrate that pirate activity can be contained when local authorities have sufficient resources to pursue and investigate perpetrators. Unfortunately, many states in the region lack both the resources to tackle pirates and the coordination required to deploy them effectively.

Australia must seek to include increased counter-piracy cooperation in its commitment to strengthen defence and economic partnerships with the nations of Southeast Asia. Australia can provide financial aid, capacity building support, and – if desired by the littoral states of the region – the direct deployment of naval assets in the pursuit of a stable and secure maritime security environment. Maritime piracy will continue to pose a challenge to the stability of trade in the world's busiest sea lanes, but with continued multilateral cooperation, the strengthening of information sharing and joint security initiatives, and increased resourcing of local maritime law enforcement agencies, this escalating issue can be controlled.

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