

Piracy all at sea: Maritime piracy, violence and the international response

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Researchers in Hong Kong have analyzed the incidence of maritime piracy during the last decade and have developed a way to predict whether or not a particular vessel, with a specific cargo, shipping in a given patch of water is likely to be a target for piracy and what degree of violence might be involved.

Mei Chi Wong and Tsz Leung Yip of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, in Kowloon, explain how maritime [piracy](#) is now high on the merchant shipping agenda as incidents become increasingly frequent across the globe. The team has analysed data for the period 2002 to 2009 from the ICC International Maritime Bureau to assess the type of criminal action that takes place, whether hijacking for ransom or direct theft and to report on the approach taken by the pirates in terms of arms and violence. As such, writing in the *International Journal of Shipping and Transport Logistics* they offer some suggestions to the authorities and to commercial shipping concerns.

"In general, merchant ships are not designed or equipped to fend off pirates' attacks and thus they are susceptible to pirate activities including boarding, hostage-taking, and stealing cargo," the team says. They add that valuable cargoes, including gas, oil, rice, and fishing products are commonly targeted, but whole vessels might also be hijacked and held to ransom. Kidnapping by maritime pirates is also on the rise. The team has studied piracy in the context of safety rather than in terms of goods or vessels stolen and used statistical analysis to categorise and codify hundreds of attacks.

The team showed that bulk carriers, general [cargo ships](#), containerships, chemical tankers, and tankers were the most targeted vessels, accounting for more than three-quarters of all ships attacked during 2002-2009.

In terms of violence, attacks categorised as low-level or no violence, usually involve largely untrained pirates with simple weapons attacked berthed or anchored vessels and stealing goods or supplies. Medium-level violence usually involves threats, assault and sometimes hostage-taking. In major violent piracy, people are attacked and/or kidnapped. In most cases, these types of attack are carried out while a vessel is at sea. Lives are often lost in such attacks and the pirates themselves are commonly well armed and organised. The team has found that the type of attack does not generally correlate with the flag being flown by the vessel. However, statistically, most attacks occur within territorial seas and involve low-level attacks in South Asia (around the Malacca Strait) and Africa (around the Gulf of Aden).

As such, the team discusses options for avoiding attack involving alternative shipping routes and the use of armed guards on merchant vessels. Their analysis should provide shipping companies, policy makers, and other stakeholders with the necessary information to quantify the risk of piracy and the degree of violence and so put in place measures to ameliorate this risk for any particular vessel, cargo, or location.

"The paper describes the incident chain of piracy attacks and further provides statistical evidence that the relationship of piracy outcome (attack success and violence used) and some causes - e.g. larger vessels are safer against piracy attacks but, if attacked successfully, the violence level tends to be higher," says Yip. It also shows that the current measures used by individual ships against piracy attacks have reduced the attacks of low-level violence only. More international condemnation is required for major [violence](#) piracy attacks."

More information: "Maritime piracy: an analysis of attacks and violence" in *Int. J. Shipping and Transport Logistics*, 2012, 4, 306-322

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